# The Story of SAIUNKOKU

5

Art by
Kairi Yura

Story by
Sai Yukino

# The Story of SAIUNKOKU

5

Art by Kairi Yura

Story by Sai Yukino

# Volume 5
## Contents


Chapter 17 3

Chapter 18 37

Chapter 19 73

Chapter 20 89

Chapter 21 113

Side Story: When Dreams Float into Reality 139

Side Story: One Tiny Wish 167


### Story Thus Far

When Ryuki, the young emperor of Saiunkoku, proclaimed that women shall be permitted to take the Imperial Civil Exam, the way was opened for Shurei to fulfill her long-cherished wish to become a civil servant. Under the tutelage of Koyu, Shurei has begun an extremely stringent study regimen in anticipation of the exam. However, on a winter's day not long before the start of exam season, Shurei finds herself chasing after a naughty student in her class and winds up falling into an icy lake! Soon after, when word spreads that Shurei is "down and out with a cold," a stream of anxious male visitors comes to visit her: Shuei, Koyu, Ryuki and even Reishin! But when these clashing personalities come together, a simple bedside visit ends up becoming more like a battle...!

**Ryuki Shi**
The young emperor of Saiunkoku. He has been pining ceaselessly for Shurei since her departure from the Inner Court.

**Shurei Hong**
A young noblewoman of the prestigious but impoverished Hong Clan. She dreams of becoming Saiunkoku's first female civil servant.

**Seiran Shi**
After being taken in by Shurei's father, Shoka, Seiran has served the Hong household as its faithful retainer ever since. He is actually Ryuki's older brother.

**Koyu Ri**
A civil servant renowned throughout the court as a genius, currently stuck in a frivolous position (perhaps!) serving Ryuki. He has a hopelessly bad sense of direction.

**Shuei Ran**
A military officer. He is a general of the Yulin Guard, a squad of soldiers charged with protecting the emperor. He is inseparable from Koyu (much to his friend's ire).

**Shoka Hong**
The eldest son of the Hong clan and Shurei's father. He holds a leisurely post as the Imperial Archivist, but there is a darker side to this ex-assassin as well.

Chapter 17
It was the season when every breath curled like clouds of white smoke, and the icy wind nipped at reddening cheeks...
This happened shortly after the New Year.
IT'S PROBABLY A COLD.
LEAPING INTO A RIVER IN THE DEAD OF WINTER... WE SHOULD BE THANKFUL YOUR HEART DIDN'T STOP IN THE FREEZING WATER.
I SLIPPED...
RYUSHIN WAS BEING NAUGHTY IN CLASS TODAY...
I WAS CHASING HIM ALONG THE BANK WHEN I... LOST MY FOOTING AND...

BUT A COLD...? IT'S BEEN YEARS SINCE I LAST HAD ONE...
NO MORE TALKING. YOU NEED TO REST. I'LL GO MAKE YOU SOMETHING WARM TO DRINK AND BRING A COLD COMPRESS FOR YOUR FOREHEAD.
I'LL JUST BE A MOMENT, MY LADY.
I'M SORRY FOR THIS TROUBLE. FALLING ILL LIKE A CHILD...

I'LL STAY RIGHT HERE BESIDE YOU, SO PLEASE TRY TO GET SOME SLEEP.
YOUR HAND FEELS SO NICE AND COOL, SEIRAN...
SUKK
fomp fomp
SEIRAA...!
SUKK
AAH!
PLOP
SEI...
...RAA!
FALLING ILL LIKE A CHILD..

Yay!
Yay!
BE A GOOD GIRL AND STAY IN BED.
YOU HAVE A FEVER, SO PLEASE STOP ROLLING AROUND.
MADAM? IS THE MEDICINE READY?
AH. I'VE GOT IT RIGHT HERE.
AND PLEASE REMAIN UNDER YOUR BLANKET!
BUT I MUST SAY...
Hee hee
SPEAKING SO SERIOUSLY TO A FOUR-YEAR-OLD..
YOU SURE ARE AN INTERESTING ONE, SEIRAN!
?!
PRUMP
MY LITTLE SHUREI CERTAINLY HAS TAKEN A SHINE TO YOU!

HAVEN'T I TOLD YOU TO STOP MAKING THOSE SOURPUSS EXPRESSIONS?
ESPECIALLY AS YOU HAVE SUCH A PRETTY FACE. SUCH A SHAME.
WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING, MADAM?
YOU THINK NOT?
I BET SMILING WOULD STOP SHUREI FROM CRAWLING OUT OF BED SO OFTEN.
Hmm.
WHETHER I SMILE OR FROWN IS UP TO ME.
IT ISN'T AS IF IT MAKES ANY DIFFERENCE EITHER WAY.
SHOMP
MY LADY!
SEIRAA!
SMILE, SEIRAA!
SMILE!

YOU SEE? THERE NOW, GIVE HER A LITTLE SMILE, WOULD YOU? IN FACT, DIDN'T I ORDER YOU TO SMILE AT LEAST ONCE A DAY FOR HER?
...
WHAT'S THIS? IS IT DAILY SMILING TIME?
I'LL JOIN IN TOO.
smile
smile
smile
smile
I... I CAN'T SMILE WHEN YOU'RE ALL STARING AT ME LIKE THAT...
SUUU
TMP TMP TMP TMP
BAM

MY LORD?
WEREN'T YOU SUPPOSED TO SPEND THE NIGHT IN THE ARCHIVES?
NEVER MIND THAT!
WHUMP
SHUREI HAS FALLEN ILL?!
WHY DID I BRING ALL THE BLANKETS IN THE HOUSE HERE AGAIN...?
THAT'S RIGHT! WE HAVE TO KEEP SHUREI WARM!
Uhhhhh
WAIT, WHY WOULD I GIVE HER A COLD COMPRESS WHEN WE'RE TRYING TO WARM HER UP?!
AND A COLD COMPRESS!!
AND OF COURSE SOME STRENGTH-FORTIFYING RICE...
OH, YES. I SHOULD BREW HER SOME MEDICINE! AND MAKE HER SOME HOT GINGER BROTH!
WHAT ELSE? WHAT ELSE?
MY LORD!
HUH?!

Hm...
WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS?
SHUREI, HOW ARE YOU FEELING?
PLEASE CALM YOURSELF, MY LORD.
HEEZE
HUFF
HEEZE
HUFF
YES... YOU'RE RIGHT. I MUST CALM DOWN...
IT'S JUST BEEN SO LONG SINCE SHE'S FALLEN ILL. I SUPPOSE I BECAME TOO ALARMED...
FATHER...
Heh
...SINCE I'VE FELT THIS...
IT'S BEEN SO LONG...
NOW YOU JUST REST, SHUREI. DADDY WILL MAKE SOME OF HIS SPECIAL-RECIPE GINGER BROTH FOR YOU!
It's been a while since I've made it for you, hasn't it?

VUMP
D-DON'T TROUBLE YOURSELF, FATHER! I-IT'S BEEN SO LONG SINCE YOU'VE MADE IT. YOU SHOULDN'T TRY NOW!
I AGREE, MY LORD! PLEASE LEAVE THE GINGER BROTH TO ME!
REEL
OHH...
MY LADY!
SHUREI, YOU JUST REST.
DON'T WORRY ABOUT A THING. I'LL BE FINE.
ONCE YOU TAKE A SIP OF MY SPECIAL-RECIPE GINGER BROTH, THAT COLD WILL BE GONE IN A FLASH!
VISH
F-FA-THER... NO...!
THE KITCHEN WILL BE GONE IN A FLASH!
SEI... SEIRAN... PLEASE KEEP AN EYE ON FATHER...
huff
MAKE SURE THE HOUSE... DOESN'T END UP IN A WORSE STATE THAN IT ALREADY IS, OR WE'LL BE OUT ON THE STREET BEFORE LONG...
hiff
UNDER-STOOD, MY LADY.
TOLT
KRASH
BONK
SLAM
THAK

BOTH FATHER AND MOTHER...
...WERE EQUALLY CLUMSY IN THE KITCHEN.
I USED TO HEAR THESE SOUNDS ALL THE TIME WHEN I WAS LITTLE.
TRASH
CLANG
TSUK TSUK
YES...
PLEASE TRY TO REST.
IS ANYONE HOME?
PLEASE PARDON OUR INTRUSION!
OH! WE HAVE SOME GUESTS, SEIRAN.
IT'S CRITICAL THAT I NOT LET THE MASTER OUT OF MY SIGHT RIGHT NOW.
WHO COULD IT BE AT A TIME LIKE THIS?
IT'S EXACTLY AS IT WAS BACK THEN...
IT'S BEEN SO LONG, I SEEM TO HAVE LOST A BIT OF MY SKILLS.
UTTER DEVASTATION!

GENERAL RAN!
MASTER KOYU!
WE HEARD MASTER SHOKA WENT FLYING OUT OF THE PALACE AFTER HEARING THAT SHUREI WAS SICK, SO WE CAME TO SEE HOW SHE WAS.
I ABSOLUTELY INSIST THAT YOU LEND US YOUR KINDLY AID— FOR LADY SHUREI'S SAKE.
GRAB
THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR COMING!
BEFORE THE KITCHEN IS UTTERLY DE-STROYED...
WON'T YOU PLEASE MAKE SOMETHING FOR LADY SHUREI TO EAT?

I'M NEARLY DONE WITH THE GINGER BROTH I'M MAKING FOR HER.
Now it's worse!
OH! HAVE YOU COME TO INQUIRE AFTER MY DAUGHTER'S HEALTH, MY LORDS?
THIS PLACE...
IN THAT CASE, YOU MIGHT INSTEAD CALL IT "MASTER SHOKA'S GINGERLY MADE GINGER-LESS BROTH"...
...OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT?
THEN HOW CAN YOU CALL IT GINGER BROTH...?!
UM, MASTER SHOKA... THERE DOESN'T APPEAR TO BE ANY GINGER IN THAT GINGER BROTH...
PER-CEPTIVE AS ALWAYS, MASTER KOYU! YOU'RE QUITE RIGHT.
FORGIVE ME. I WASN'T THINK-ING...
INDEED. IT SEEMS WE'RE COMPLETELY OUT OF GINGER AT THE MOMENT, UNFORTUNATELY. I SEARCHED ALL OVER AND STILL COULDN'T FIND ANY.
COMING UP WITH CLEVER WORDPLAY.
Hmm...
HOW ARTFUL...

gloop
gloop
THE GINGER BROTH IS MORE THAN ENOUGH!
OH? BUT I WAS GETTING FIRED UP TO COOK DINNER...
LET US NOT WASTE OUR GUESTS' GENEROUS OFFER OF ASSISTANCE.
MY LORD, WE THREE SHALL TAKE CHARGE OF THE MEAL PREPARATION, SO PLEASE GO STAY WITH LADY SHUREI.
EXACTLY WHY IS IT THAT, IN ORDER TO PAY A VISIT TO YOUR NIECE, WE HAD TO CLIMB OVER THEIR NEIGHBOR'S WALL AND SNEAK IN THROUGH THE BACK?
IN THE MIDDLE OF WINTER, NO LESS. THIS IS RIDICULOUS.
SNARL
SHE'S FAST ASLEEP.
OH, HOW PITIFUL SHE LOOKS LYING THERE WITH HER CHEEKS ALL FLUSHED..

GRIP
AND I FIND IT EXCEEDINGLY SUSPICIOUS THAT YOU DECIDED TO LEAVE YOUR MASK OFF JUST FOR THIS VISIT.
OH NO YOU DON'T! YOU'RE STAYING RIGHT HERE WITH ME.
THAT IS NO CONCERN OF MINE.
I SHALL BE PREPARED TO REINTRODUCE MYSELF TO HER, SO I SHALL GO MAKE A PROPER VISIT.
IT CAN'T BE HELPED! I'VE NOT YET WORKED UP THE COURAGE TO TELL HER WHO I REALLY AM!
ONE MIGHT THINK THAT YOU WERE SCHEMING TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF MY NIECE WHILE SHE'S IN A VULNERABLE STATE!
YOU BECOME A MOST EXTRAORDINARY IDIOT WHEN IT COMES TO YOUR BELOVED BROTHER AND HIS FAMILY, DON'T YOU?
WHAT IN THE WORLD ARE YOU DOING OUT HERE, REISHIN?
URK
OH, YOU'RE HERE AS WELL, MINISTER KO?
B-BROTH-ER...
WE CAME TO INQUIRE AFTER YOUR DAUGHTER'S HEALTH, MASTER SHOKA. PLEASE PARDON OUR UNORTHODOX ARRIVAL.

BR-BROTHER... I...
DON'T WORRY.
SHUREI IS SLEEP-ING.
COME INSIDE.
YOU'LL LET ME IN? REALLY?
YOU'RE MY BELOVED YOUNGER BROTHER. I WOULDN'T LEAVE YOU OUTSIDE IN THIS WEATHER.
"BE LOVED"
B-BROTHER!! I—
I TOO BROUGHT GIFTS!
FROM AN HERBALIST? THANK YOU VERY MUCH INDEED.
THESE FLOWERS ARE A GET-WELL GIFT FOR YOUR DAUGHTER.
I HAVE ALSO BROUGHT ALONG A STRENGTH-BOOSTING MEDICINE I OBTAINED FROM AN HERBALIST.
IT IS SAID THAT FRUITS ARE GOOD FOR THOSE WHO ARE ILL!
AND I BROUGHT EVERY TYPE OF MEDICINE I COULD THINK OF!

REISHIN, THAT'S FAR TOO MUCH...
MUST YOU GO OVER-BOARD IN EVERY-THING YOU DO?
AND THE MEDI-CINE...
THERE'S EVERYTHING HERE FROM POTENCY-ENHANCING POTIONS TO MENSTRUATION AIDS AND LABOR PAIN RELIEVERS.
I'LL BEHEAD THE DOCTOR WHO SOLD ME ALL THIS!
Ugh
DON'T BE RIDICULOUS! REISHIN, WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?
GLOOM
Here, take the potency potion home with you.
MY LORD.
DINNER IS READY.
THANK YOU, REISHIN.
THAT SAID, I DO APPRECIATE YOUR INTENT.
THAT FOOL.
KISS

SHUREI IS FINALLY SLEEPING SOUNDLY.
LET'S EAT ON OUR OWN FOR NOW AND LET HER REST.
GEH
HUH?
SEI-RAN...
CAN YOU PREPARE THE TABLE FOR TWO MORE GUESTS?
W-WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?
AND WHAT IS SO WRONG ABOUT AN UNCLE VISITING HIS AILING NIECE, HM?
IT SEEMS TO ME THAT YOU ARE THE INCONGRUOUS PARTY. SNEAKING OFF BEHIND MY BACK TO PLACES YOU'RE NOT NEEDED..
YOU CERTAINLY HAVE NERVE, PREPARE YOURSELF. I'LL HAVE WORDS FOR YOU LATER.
WHY WAS HE THE ONE TO ADOPT ME?

EXCUSE ME FOR INTERRUPTING SOMETHING OBVIOUSLY QUITE INVOLVED...
...BUT IT SEEMS THERE'S ANOTHER VISITOR AT THE GATE.
MASTER HONG.
AH, YOU'RE RYUSHIN'S FATHER, AREN'T YOU?
I TRULY APOLOGIZE. MY SON HAS CAUSED YOU A GREAT DEAL OF TROUBLE TODAY.
IT'S ALL RIGHT. SHE CAUGHT JUST A MILD COLD.
PLEASE DON'T LET IT TROUBLE YOU.
...
WAS THERE SOMETHING ELSE BOTHERING YOU?
WELL... I WAS WONDERING IF MY BRAT OF A SON HAD BEEN HERE AT ALL TODAY.
HOW LONG HAS RYUSHIN BEEN MISSING?
THAT BOY... HE BEGAN BABBLING THIS AFTERNOON ABOUT GOING TO THE MOUNTAINS.

PLEASE FORGIVE MY INTRUSION. I'D BEST CONTINUE MY SEARCH.
I HEARD ABOUT LADY SHUREI AND WONDERED IF HE MIGHT HAVE COME HERE TO SEE HER...
BUT HE STILL HASN'T COME HOME TONIGHT, SO NOW I'M STARTING TO WORRY.
THE MOUNTAINS IN THE MIDST OF WINTER— I DIDN'T THINK HE'D REALLY DO SOMETHING SO FOOLISH.
ONE MOMENT, PLEASE. RYUSHIN LEFT SAYING HE WAS GOING TO THE MOUNTAINS, CORRECT?
IF A CHILD WANDERED UP THOSE WINTRY PEAKS ALONE AND STILL HASN'T RETURNED...
THE ONLY MOUNTAIN NEAR ENOUGH FOR A CHILD TO ATTEMPT TO REACH AND COME BACK IN AN AFTERNOON WOULD BE...
MT. RYU, WHERE MADAM'S GRAVESITE IS.
AH, IF IT'S MT. RYU, WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO SEARCH ON HORSE-BACK.
IN THAT CASE, I'LL GO GET SOME COLD-WEATHER GEAR FROM THE HONG MAIN HOUSE WHILE YOU PREPARE THE HORSES.
THAT'S ALL RIGHT WITH YOU, ISN'T IT, MY LORD REISHIN?

HM?
YES SIR...
BUT REMEMBER IF YOU MEET WITH DISASTER AND END UP STRANDED IN THE MOUNTAINS, ALL THOSE BRAINS OF YOURS WON'T DO YOU ONE BIT OF GOOD.
AS YOU PLEASE.
REISHIN, AT A TIME LIKE THIS YOU SHOULD SAY, "BE CAREFUL AND COME HOME SAFELY."
WHAP
YES, BROTHER.

I SHALL GO DIRECTLY AND BEGIN PREPARATIONS.
MY ESTATE IS NOT FAR FROM MT. RYU. ONCE YOU'VE FOUND HIM, YOU MAY BRING HIM THERE.
Y-YES, MY LORD.
RYU, PLEASE SEARCH THE ROAD LEADING UP TO MT. RYU.
GENERAL RAN, SEIRAN, PLEASE GO THERE NOW WITH MASTER KOYU.
TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE. WE'LL BORROW HORSES FROM THE MAIN HOUSE AS WELL.
IT SEEMS THE FOOD HAS GOTTEN COLD.
He did bring a mask!
THANK YOU VERY MUCH INDEED, MINISTER KO.
OH
SO YOU CAN STOP WORRYING THAT SOME ONE-IN-A-MILLION DISASTER WILL BEFALL YOUNG KOYU.
YOU NEEDN'T WORRY. IF THINGS TAKE A TURN FOR THE WORSE, I SHALL GO AFTER THEM MYSELF.
WHAT A SHAME. MASTER KOYU AND THE OTHERS WENT TO SO MUCH TROUBLE TO MAKE IT.

IF YOU DESIRE, I COULD HAVE THEM TAKE MT. RYU APART STONE BY STONE AND EVEN SEARCH THE WINTER CAVES OF SLUMBERING BEARS.
IF YOU THINK THE SITUATION COULD WORSEN TO THE POINT THAT YOU WOULD GO AFTER THEM, I WOULD RATHER SEND MY "SHADOW" FORCES RIGHT NOW.
I WOULD BE GLAD FOR SOME COMPANY IF YOU'D CARE TO JOIN ME, REISHIN.
WELL, I'D BEST FORTIFY MYSELF WITH A GOOD MEAL IN CASE I DO HAVE TO STEP OUT.

ALL I WANT IS FOR YOU AND SHUREI TO LIVE PEACEFUL, HAPPY LIVES NOW.
I DON'T WANT YOU TO DO ANYTHING ANYMORE.
WHATEVER THE MISSION, MY STANCE REMAINS THE SAME.
I'M NOT GOING TO KILL ANYONE THIS TIME.

BAM
IT WAS A MERE TEN YEARS!
I THANK YOU FOR THAT.
AND AS YOU WISHED, I HAVE SPENT THOSE YEARS ENJOYING MYSELF, READING THE BOOKS I WANTED AND PASSING MY DAYS QUIETLY...
REISHIN... I KNOW IT WAS AT YOUR BEHEST THAT I HAVE BEEN KEPT COMFORTABLY AS IMPERIAL ARCHIVIST THESE PAST TEN YEARS.
SIP

AND IT WASN'T AS QUIET AND PEACEFUL AS YOU SAY!
WHEN I HEARD THAT YOU WERE DISPATCHED TO FIND THE BANISHED PRINCE...
...I SENT ASSASSIN AFTER ASSASSIN TO PUNISH THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR.
BUT THEY WERE ALL THWARTED BY HIS ACCURSED EXCELLENCY, LORD ADVISOR GOU, WEREN'T THEY?
YES... I'VE OFTEN WONDERED IF THAT OLD MAN WEREN'T SOME TANUKI SPIRIT, OUTSMARTING ME AT EVERY TURN...
BUT HOW IN HEAVEN'S NAME COULD THAT BE CONSIDERED A QUIET AND PEACEFUL LIFE?!
TO THE VERY LAST, BROTHER, THEY CONTINUED USING YOU, HEAPING ONE BURDEN AFTER THE NEXT UPON YOU!
I KNOW THAT SOMEONE NEEDED TO TAKE ON THE ROLE OF THE EMPEROR'S ASSASSIN...
BUT FOR CHOOSING YOU— I SHALL NEVER FORGIVE THEM TO THE VERY END OF MY DAYS!
MEETING MY BELOVED WIFE AND BEING BLESSED WITH SHUREI...
I'M ALL RIGHT, REISHIN. THE PATH I HAVE WALKED WAS ONE I CHOSE MYSELF.
IT WAS NEVER A BURDEN.
GOING AFTER SEIRAN, SPENDING TIME WITH RYUKI...
IT WAS MY WILL.
NO ONE IS TO BLAME FOR MY BLOOD-SOAKED HANDS BUT ME.

I HAVE BEEN TRULY HAPPY.
KNOWING YOU WERE ON MY SIDE, SO FULL OF GENUINE CONCERN...
HONG CLAN
THIRD SON
!!
EVEN KURO WAS CARING FOR ME IN HIS OWN WAY. I TRULY AM BLESSED, HAVING SUCH LOVABLE YOUNGER BROTHERS.
KURO?! KURO DOESN'T UNDERSTAND YOU AT ALL, BROTHER!
I'm sure I'm far more lovable than he!
WHY ARE YOU ALWAYS SO LENIENT WITH HIM—
AH, IT SEEMS THE TEA HAS GONE COLD. SHALL I BREW US A NEW POT?
YES! I SHALL DRINK IT!
BROTH-ER...
WOULD IT BE ALL RIGHT IF I CALLED UPON YOU AGAIN?
P-PREFER-ABLY WHEN SHUREI IS THE ONE COOKING...
THAT WILL BE FINE...

BUT SHUREI MUST THINK TERRIBLY OF ME!
I'M SURE SHE SEES ME AS SOME BARBAROUS BRUTE UNCLE WHO DROVE HER FAMILY FROM THE ANCESTRAL HOME AND USURPED YOUR RIGHTFUL PLACE AS THE HEAD OF THE CLAN... AND THEN CUT YOU OFF FROM THE FAMILY FORTUNE!
BROTHER!
...ONCE YOU INTRODUCE YOURSELF TO SHUREI PROPERLY.
THAT'S HOW BADLY HE WANTS HER TO THINK WELL OF HIM, HUH?
Kish
Kish kish
AND SHE EVEN CALLED ME A "GOOD PERSON" THIS SUMMER...!
YOU'RE THE WORST UNCLE IN THE WORLD! I HATE MEN LIKE YOU!
I CAN'T BEAR THE THOUGHT OF HER SAYING SOMETHING LIKE THAT TO ME!
IF ONLY HE'D EXPRESS A FRACTION OF THAT DOTING AFFECTION TO KOYU AS WELL...
BROTHER....
mnh

I HATE THE IMPERIAL FAMILY AND THAT CLINGY, SNOT-NOSED EMPEROR FOR ALL THE TROUBLE THEY'VE CAUSED YOU.
SHUREI IS MY DARLING NIECE...
IF THAT EMPEROR TRIES TO GET ANY CLOSER TO HER, I WILL NOT HESITATE TO STOP HIM BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY.
SHOCK
MIN-ISTER HONG!!
WE CAN'T LET MINISTER HONG DISCOVER US HERE! HE'LL THROW US OUT!
WHEN WE HEARD SHUREI WAS SICK, WE PANICKED AND RAN STRAIGHT HERE WITHOUT SENDING WORD OF OUR ARRIVAL.
OUR PRESENCE HERE MIGHT BE CONSIDERED UNTOWARD.
SHUFF
WE'LL JUST QUICKLY SNEAK IN TO SEE SHUREI BEFORE LEAVING.
IS IT HERE?
IT SEEMS MOST NOBLE HOUSES FOLLOW A SIMILAR FLOOR PLAN.
SHUFF

SO THIS IS SHUREI'S ROOM.
SHUREI!

HOW WE HAVE WANTED TO SEE YOU AGAIN!
SHUREI.
OH
NN...
TOO HOT...
huff
huff
SHE HAS A FEVER.
NMM...
HER FEVER IS FAR TOO STRONG.
ARE YOU IN PAIN?

shup
shup
THE WATER ISN'T COLD ENOUGH.
SNOW...
SHE'S SWEATING A LOT...
THIS SHOULD HELP.
smp

SPLASH
WE'LL JUST HAVE TO APOLOGIZE EARNESTLY TO SHUSUI LATER FOR THIS.
...
SHE'S SWEATING SO.
SHU-REI...
KRIP
KRIP
MM...
VEEN

WE MUSTN'T TAKE ADVANTAGE OF AN AILING MAIDEN WHILE SHE SLUMBERS...
shff

...THE DOLL WE SENT SHUREI AS A GIFT!
AND THE LETTERS WE SENT HER AS WELL...?
THAT'S...
THE DOLL...
SHE'S STORED OUR LETTERS INSIDE A LETTER BOX...
COULD IT BE SHE'S USING IT AS A DECORATION FOR HER ROOM?
SHUREI DOES NOT REGARD US WITH THE SAME FEELINGS OF LOVE THAT WE HAVE FOR HER...
WE KNOW THAT, AND YET...
IT'S ALL RIGHT... WE CAN WAIT FOR YOU.
SHU-REI?
NN...
HER LIPS ARE DRY.

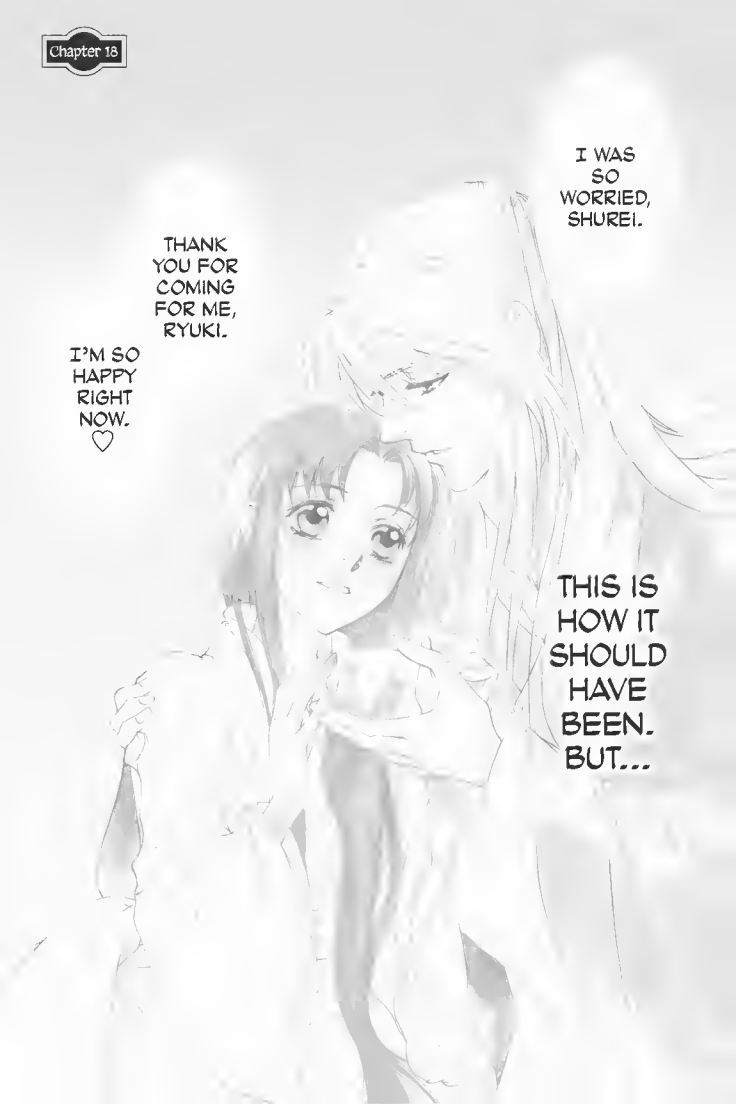
MM...
GL OOM
SIGH
SHUREI, YOU MUST NOT FALL ILL LIKE THIS TOO OFTEN...
HOW UTTERLY HELPLESS AND VULNERABLE AN AILING MAIDEN IS...
IT'S PURE TOR-TURE...

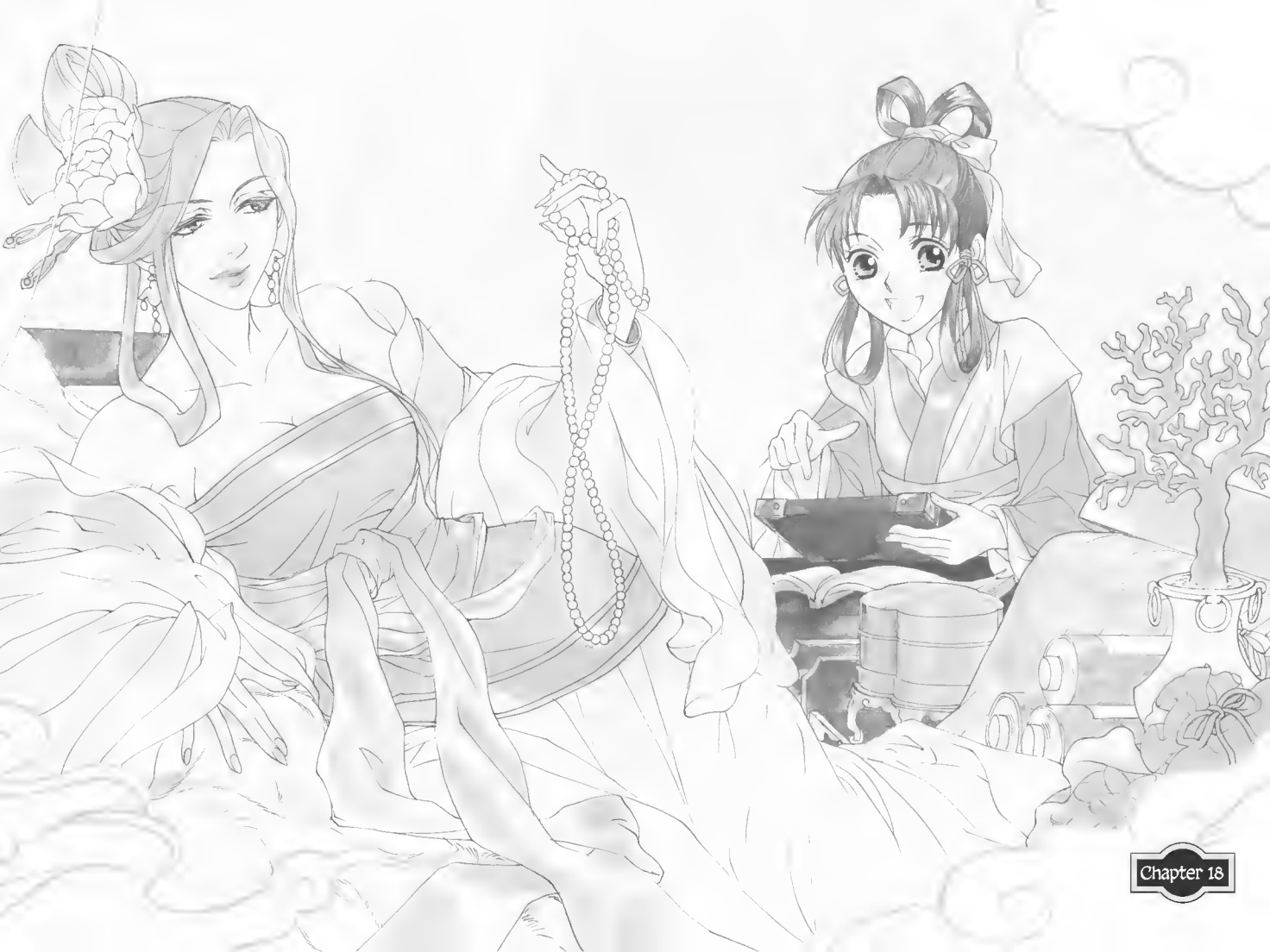
WHAT A FOOL WE ARE.

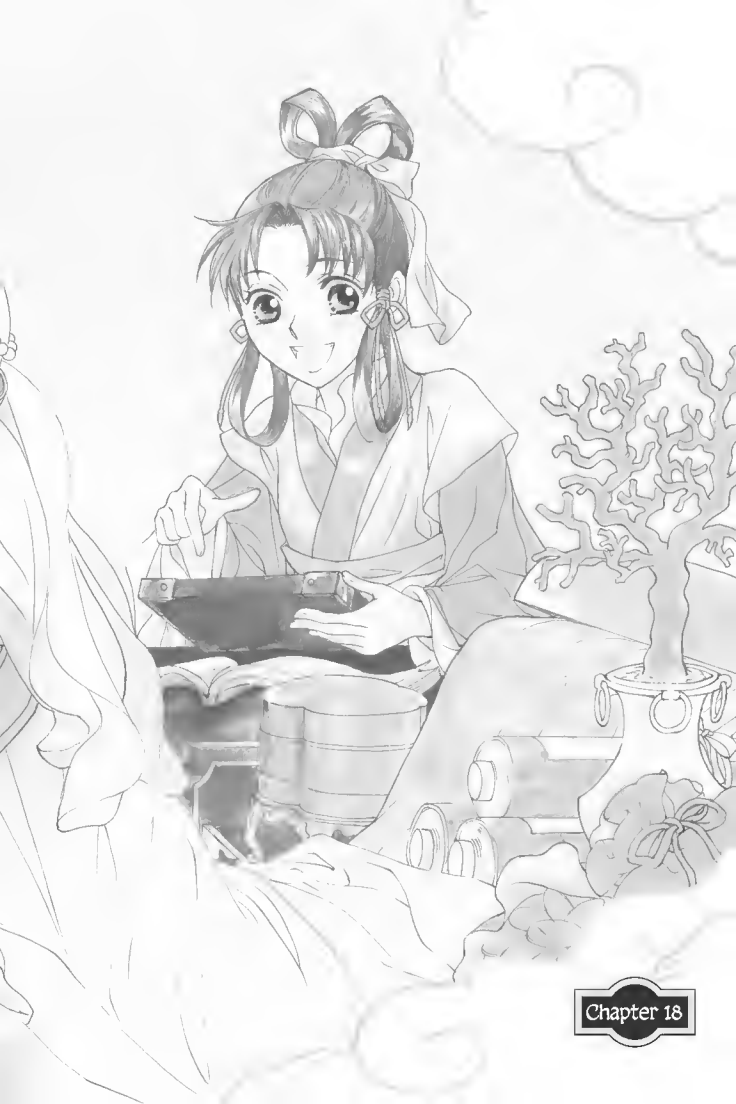
SHUREI IS CERTAIN TO PASS THE CIVIL EXAM.

BY OUR OWN HAND, WE CAUSE THE ONE WE LOVE TO MOVE FARTHER AND FARTHER FROM US.

SHK
MHN...
EE...
SHU-REI?!
Y-yucky..?
SHOCK
EWWW...
YUCKY..
THAT'S WHY... YOU'LL FORGIVE THIS MUCH, WON'T YOU?
GYAAAAAH
GULP
ARE YOU ALL RIGHT? HANG ON!
THIS MUST BE HER MEDICINE.
TINK
HERE, DRINK THIS, SHUREI.


I WAS SO WORRIED, SHUREI.
THANK YOU FOR COMING FOR ME, RYUKI.
I'M SO HAPPY RIGHT NOW. ♡
THIS IS HOW IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN. BUT...


Chapter 18


Chapter 18

The Story of
SAIUNKOKU

ALL WE WANTED WAS TO SEE SHUREI AGAIN.

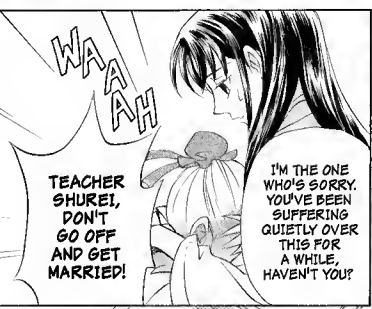
WE WEREN'T SNEAKING IN FOR A MIDNIGHT TRYST THIS TIME. WE CAME ONLY TO WISH HER WELL!

YOUR MAJESTY...
OH
THE VERY IMAGE OF A MAN FORCING HIMSELF UPON A HELPLESS MAIDEN IN HER BED
...

glug
glug
← water
IT SEEMS THE MIXTURE OF THE HERBALIST'S MEDICINE AND MASTER SHOKA'S GINGER BROTH WAS JUST TOO MUCH FOR LADY SHUREI.
THIS MUST BE THE REAL CULPRIT.
WE TOLD YOU WE DIDN'T DO ANYTHING!
TREMBL
TREMBL
TREMBL
SOB
SHIK
SHIK
AT LEAST IT SEEMS TO HAVE RESTORED SOME OF YOUR ENERGY. YOUR FEVER SEEMS TO BE LESSENING AS WELL.
GINGER BROTH? BUT I DIDN'T TASTE ANY GINGER IN IT.
BY THE TIME GENERAL RAN FOUND HIM SEEKING SHELTER IN A CAVE, HIS HANDS AND FEET WERE SHOWING TRACES OF FROSTBITE.
HE GOT LOST IN THE MOUNTAINS SEARCHING FOR MEDICINAL HERBS.
RYUSHIN! WHAT HAPPENED? ALL THOSE BANDAGES...
TEACHER SHUREI!

I WANTED TO BE WITH YOU AS MUCH AS I COULD, SO I STARTED BEING NAUGHTY TO STAY AFTER LESSONS... I NEVER MEANT TO CAUSE YOU ANY REAL TROUBLE.
I HEARD THAT SOON YOU WON'T BE TEACHING US AT THE TEMPLE ANYMORE.

RYUSHIN... ARE THESE HERBS FOR ME?
IT WAS MY FAULT YOU GOT SICK! I'M SO SORRY, TEACHER SHUREI!


WAAAH
TEACHER SHUREI, DON'T GO OFF AND GET MARRIED!
I'M THE ONE WHO'S SORRY. YOU'VE BEEN SUFFERING QUIETLY OVER THIS FOR A WHILE, HAVEN'T YOU?

RYU-SHIN...
I'M SO SORRY!
BUT YOU FELL INTO THE RIVER AND GOT SICK BECAUSE OF ME...

STOP RIGHT THERE, BOY!
IF SHUREI WERE TO MARRY, WE WOULD HAVE A THING OR TWO TO SAY ABOUT THAT—
WELL, IT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE GOING TO GET MARRIED THAT YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO COME TEACH US ANYMORE, ISN'T IT?
IN FIVE YEARS OR SO, I COULD MARRY YOU INSTEAD. CAN'T YOU WAIT A LITTLE BIT?
HUH?!
WAIT! WHO SAID ANYTHING ABOUT GETTING MARRIED?

SHING
VHMM
A FAN?!
Klap
IT CAN ONLY BE HIS!!
WHY IS THERE A FAN FLYING THROUGH THE AIR AT YOU?
And such a fancy one too!♡
HUH?
FROM BEHIND THE DOOR...
FORGIVE ME, YOUR MAJESTY. IT SLIPPED OUT OF MY HAND JUST NOW.
RYUSHIN, I BELIEVE YOUR FATHER IS VERY WORRIED ABOUT YOU, SO YOU'D BETTER HURRY HOME.
Smile
THANK YOU FOR BRINGING THE HERBS TO SHUREI.
doop

HUH? WHOSE IS IT?
HE'S OVER THERE...
YOU SHOULD THANK THE OWNER OF THAT FAN AS WELL.
BE SURE TO THANK ALL OUR GUESTS, SHUREI. THEY ALL CAME TO ASK AFTER YOU WHEN THEY HEARD YOU'D FALLEN ILL.
YES, FATHER.
3
...
2
1
NO ANSWER.
WELL, HE WAS HERE A MOMENT AGO, BUT I SUPPOSE HE MUST HAVE LEFT ALREADY.
OH?
GEH
SEIRAN MADE SOME RICE PORRIDGE FOR YOU EARLIER, SO TRY EATING A BIT WHEN YOU FEEL ABLE. THEN GET SOME MORE REST.
I'LL PUT SOME TEA ON FOR YOU TOO.

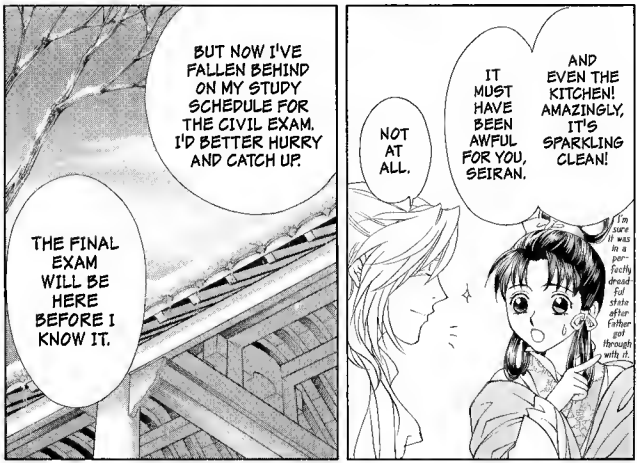
U-UM, THANK YOU ALL VERY MUCH FOR COMING TODAY!
I...I'M FEELING MUCH BETTER NOW, SO PLEASE FEEL FREE TO GO HOME.
THERE'S NO NEED TO STAY ON MY BEHALF!
QUICKLY, BEFORE THE INFAMOUS "DADDY TEA" IS SERVED!
Y-YES, INDEED. WE'D REALLY BEST BE GOING.
CERTAINLY NOT, MY LADY! WITH THE SNOW PILED SO HIGH OUTSIDE, I'M SURE OUR TWO HONORED GUESTS WOULD PREFER TO STAY THE NIGHT HERE.
AND THEIR GENEROUS OFFER TO AID US AROUND THE HOUSE IS SURE TO BE OF GREAT HELP TONIGHT.
scurry
...
YOU HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN THAT THERE IS STILL KITCHEN CLEAN-UP TO DO, HAVE YOU, MY LORDS?

WE SHALL HELP AS WELL! JUST SEE HOW HELPFUL WE CAN BE!
SEIRAN, YOU SHOULDN'T ASK GUESTS TO DO SUCH A THING...
HUH?
KLAMP
I AM CERTAIN A DAY SHALL COME WHEN THE EXPERIENCE OF SCRUBBING POTS TONIGHT WILL SURELY BE OF USE TO YOU.
THANK YOU VERY MUCH, YOUR MAJESTY.
SHUREI!
SHUG SHUG
WHAT?
TONIGHT, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN A LONG WHILE, I FELL ILL AND WAS SOUNDLY CARED FOR.
HEE

I'LL REALLY HAVE TO THANK EVERYONE AGAIN LATER...
GOOD NIGHT.
YOUR UNCLE...
I'M YOUR UNCLE, SHUREI.
mm hi
YOUR KIND AND LOVING UNCLE REISHIN...
mm hi
FOR YEARS AND YEARS, I'VE PRAYED NIGHT AND DAY THAT SOMEDAY I'D BE ABLE TO TASTE YOUR HOMEMADE STEAMED BUNS...
mm hi
I'VE ALWAYS WATCHED OVER YOU FROM AFAR...
GET UP, REISHIN. WE'RE GOING.

OH! THE SNOW IS PILED HIGH AGAIN TODAY.
IF ONLY IT WERE GRAINS OF RICE OR ROCK CANDY INSTEAD OF SNOW. THAT WOULD BE OF USE TO US.
...Once it melts, all it becomes is water. ..sadly.
YOUR CONDITION SEEMS GREATLY IMPROVED TODAY, MY LADY.
SORRY FOR MAKING YOU WORRY, SEIRAN.
I'M COMPLETELY RECOVERED!

TO HAVE SO MANY DIFFERENT PEOPLE CARE SO MUCH FOR ME...
I SENT OUT THANK-YOU NOTES TO EVERYONE WHO CAME TO VISIT ME.
I TRULY AM FORTUNATE.


BUT NOW I'VE FALLEN BEHIND ON MY STUDY SCHEDULE FOR THE CIVIL EXAM. I'D BETTER HURRY AND CATCH UP.
THE FINAL EXAM WILL BE HERE BEFORE I KNOW IT.
AND EVEN THE KITCHEN! AMAZINGLY, IT'S SPARKLING CLEAN!
IT MUST HAVE BEEN AWFUL FOR YOU, SEIRAN.
NOT AT ALL.
I'm sure it was in a perfectly dreadful state after Father got through with it.

AS I'M CAUSING MY EMPLOYERS SOME TROUBLE BY QUITTING MY PART-TIME JOBS TO STUDY, I'D BETTER GO MAKE PROPER NEW YEAR'S GREETINGS TO THEM.
MY LADY...
PLEASE TAKE CARE NOT TO DO ANYTHING TOO UNREASONABLE.
BBDMP
O-OF COURSE, SEIRAN.
He's making a scary face...

SHUREI. EXCUSE ME FOR COMING OVER SO EARLY.
MASTER KOYU?
PARDON THE INTRUSION.

HUH...?
I'VE BROUGHT ALONG SOME REFERENCE BOOKS I THOUGHT WOULD BE OF USE TO YOU.
I'LL DROP BY AFTER WORK EVERY DAY UNTIL THE EXAM TO CHECK ON YOUR PROGRESS, SO BE SURE TO KEEP UP WITH YOUR STUDIES.
YOU WANT TO MAKE UP FOR THE STUDY TIME YOU LOST, DON'T YOU?
SO WILL YOU DO IT? OR WON'T YOU?
I... I'LL DO IT!
THANK YOU VERY MUCH, MASTER KOYU!!
WE'RE DOWN TO THE LAST TWO MONTHS BEFORE THE START OF EXAMS.
THE EXAMINEES FROM THE VARIOUS PROVINCES WILL START ARRIVING IN KIYO SOON.
BE SURE YOU'RE PREPARED.

I WILL.
Around this time every year, a certain fever takes hold of Saiunkoku's capital city, Kiyo.
Hopefuls from all over the country turn their steps toward Kiyo.
All ages and walks of life gather with the same dream burning in each of their hearts.

The difference between despair and hope, jubilation and dejection...

...greatest glory and dark defeat, those who will fall and those who will remain...

These critical lines are drawn and the courses of individual lives change during this time of year.

The start of the final round of the Imperial Civil Exam.
THIS IS IT.

...THINGS CERTAINLY HAVE BECOME LIVELY AROUND HERE.
WITH VISITORS FLOODING IN FROM ALL OVER THE COUNTRY...
HOW'S BUSINESS?
YOU NEEDN'T WORRY, MY LORD
OUR LITTLE "UNDERWORLD" SYNDICATE HAS EVERYTHING UNDER CONTROL.
IF ANY OF OUR VISITING WAYFARERS IS CAUSING YOU TROUBLE, YOU MUSTN'T HESITATE TO TELL ME.
MORE IMPORTANTLY, IS IT ALL RIGHT FOR YOU REMAIN HERE, MY LORD? DIDN'T YOU HAVE A CERTAIN JOB TO PERFORM?

AT THE MOMENT, THERE IS NO JOB MORE PRESSING THAN TO PASS TIME WITH YOU LADIES.
WHAT BETTER COMPANIONS ON A COLD NIGHT THAN EXCELLENT WINE...
...AND THE WARM SKIN OF SUCH BEAUTIES?
OH, LORD RAN...!
AS HONEY-TONGUED AS EVER.
DON'T YOU QUIBBLE WITH ME, BOY!
KRASH
WHAT'S GOING ON?
JUST ANOTHER BRAWL. THERE'S NEVER A GOOD TIME TO BE HAD DURING THIS TIME OF YEAR.
HEY, LOOK...

THEY'RE PICKING ON A KID?
THIS DOESN'T LOOK GOOD.
AND AREN'T THOSE MEMBERS OF THE BLUE SCARF GANG?
THEY'RE ALL WEARING A BLUE SASH SOMEWHERE ON THEIR CLOTHING.
HEY, SOMEONE CALL THE SYNDICATE!
NO. LORD SHUEI SHOULD BE AT KOGARO RIGHT NOW. IT'D BE QUICKER TO GET HIM TO COME STOP THIS.
WE HAD A DEAL THAT THE LOSER OF OUR DRINKING CONTEST WOULD PAY FOR ALL THE WINNER'S DRINKS.
INCI-DENTALLY, THE TAB IS 10 RYO SO FAR.
D-DON'T YOU GIVE ME THAT!
HOW THE HELL COULD A PINT-SIZED BRAT LIKE YOU OUT-DRINK "THE BOTTOMLESS SEICHIN"?!

GLUG
YOU USED SOME DIRTY TRICK TO CHEAT US, DIDN'T YOU?!
I'M GLAD I WAS ABLE TO GET SOME FREE RICE WINE OUT OF THIS, BUT YOU COULDN'VE TREATED ME TO A BETTER GRADE OF IT.
GLCK
YOU'RE THE ONES WHO FORCED ME INTO THIS DRINKING MATCH. HOW COULD I HAVE PREPARED A TRICK AHEAD OF TIME?
FPSSH
GRRR
GRRR
GRRR
WHAT'D YOU SAY?
YOU LITTLE WEASEL! YOU THINK WE'LL JUST LET YOU GO?!
WE'LL STRIP YOU OF EVERY LAST THING YOU OWN!!
SOME-ONE COME QUICK!
A FIGHT!

SLAM
FWAK
BAM
EEEK!
KRIVVZ
HMPH. I WAS JUST GETTING STARTED.

shff
shff
I'VE STILL GOT MORE TO DRINK. AS IF I'D LET MYSELF GET DONE IN BY THOSE THUGS.
PATHETIC. EVEN WITH ALL THEIR MONEY COMBINED, THEY BARELY HAVE 10 RYO AMONG THEM.
CHACHK
WELL, I'M SURE I'LL FIND SOME USE FOR IT.
SHUK
KLATT
Hmph

EXCUSE ME, GOOD SIR... YOUR TAB...?
thup
CHARGE THEM FOR IT. I'M NOT THE ONE WHO OWES YOU.
B-BUT... THE 10 RYO...
THAT'S MY SHARE.
YOU CAN SELL OFF WHATEVER THEY'VE GOT ON THEM AND GET YOUR MONEY THAT WAY.
BUT...!
TMP
TMP

THAT COULDN'T BE HIM, COULD IT?
THAT TAB-LET...
klack
klack
klack
klack
klack
klack
COME ON, SHUREI...

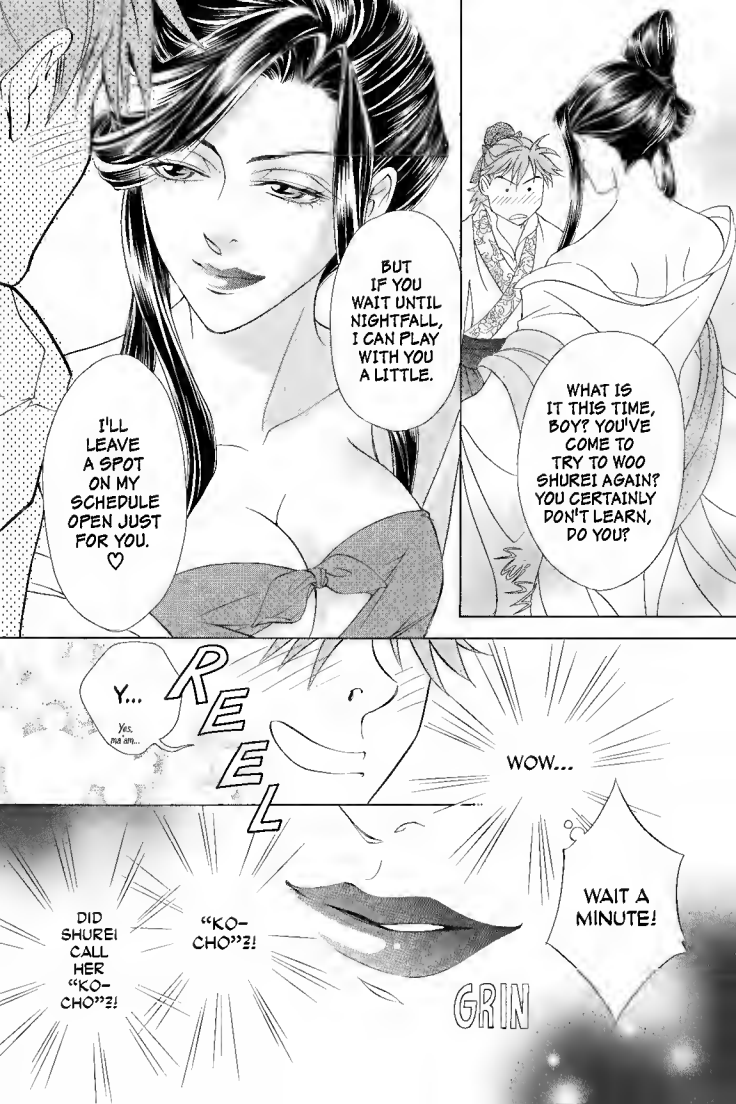
klack
klack
klack
klack
klack
klack
WHAT'S WITH YOU? WHY ARE YOU IGNORING ME?
HEY. I KNOW YOU'RE GOING OFF SOMEWHERE AGAIN. I HEARD YOU'VE BEEN MAKING YOUR FAREWELLS TO PEOPLE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD.
SO HOW LONG WILL YOU BE AWAY THIS TIME?
YOU WON'T SPEND MONTHS OFF SOMEWHERE AGAIN LIKE YOU DID LAST SPRING, WILL YOU?
YOU DO REALIZE YOU'RE GETTING TO THAT AGE NOW, RIGHT? YOU CAN'T CLING TO SEIRAN FOREVER, YOU KNOW. I MEAN, PROBABLY NOT...
IN ANY CASE, MY RELATIVES ARE STARTING TO BUG ME ABOUT GOING TO MATCHMAKER MEETINGS.
IN TRUTH, MY PARENTS HAVE ALREADY DECIDED ON A GOOD MATCH FOR ME...
THEN YOU HAVE MY COMPLETE AND WHOLE-HEARTED CONGRATULATIONS. BUT DON'T EXPECT A WEDDING GIFT.
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!
AND WHO WOULD EVER EXPECT A WEDDING GIFT FROM THE LIKES OF YOU?!

AHEM
LOOK, WE BOTH TURNED 17 AT THE NEW YEAR, RIGHT?
SINCE I'M A GUY, I'M STILL OKAY, BUT IT WON'T BE LONG BEFORE PEOPLE START CONSIDERING YOU DAY-OLD BREAD, AND THEN WHAT'LL YOU DO? YOU'LL HAVE A HARD TIME FINDING A GUY WHO'LL MARRY YOU WITHOUT A DOWRY.
thop
MY FAMILY IS PRETTY RICH, SO THEY WOULDN'T CARE TOO MUCH ABOUT A LITTLE THING LIKE A DOWRY, BUT...
SANTA...
I finally got her to look at me.
YEAH? WHAT?

I'm extremely busy!
I DON'T HAVE THE TIME TO WASTE ON YOU TODAY. I NEED TO GET THESE LEDGERS UP TO DATE AND THEN CLEAR THE SNOW OUT FRONT BEFORE OPENING TIME.
HONESTLY, COMING HERE OVER AND OVER AND BOTHERING ME EVERY TIME I'M TRYING TO WORK...!
WHETHER I'M "DAY-OLD BREAD" OR NOT, AND NO MATTER HOW HARD A TIME I HAVE FINDING A HUSBAND, IT DOESN'T CONCERN YOU! GOT IT?!
NOW, SANTA!
DON'T CALL ME "SANTA"! I'M AN ADULT, SO I'M "KEICHO" NOW!
SO KINDLY BE ON YOUR WAY!
HUH? WHY ARE YOU SO DRESSED UP TODAY?
HA! SO YOU FINALLY NOTICED.
ガラ?
YOU'RE STILL SANTA TO ME!
Third son Santa!
WE'VE KNOWN EACH OTHER SINCE WE WERE KIDS, BUT YOU CAN'T KEEP CALLING ME BY MY KID NAME!

CHIN
NNG
THE GRAND TOTAL IS 1 GOLD RYO AND 50 SILVER RYO.
EXACTLY RIGHT.
HAIR SASH: 1 SILVER RYO.
LET'S SEE... TUNIC: 30 SILVER RYO. UNDER-TUNIC: 10 SILVER RYO.
BELT: 1 GOLD RYO. BLUE SILK SASH: 1 SILVER RYO.
SHOES: 3 SILVER RYO. SHOE EMBROIDERY: 6 SILVER RYO.
KLACK
KLACK
KLACK
KLACK
DON'T... YOU HAVE ANYTHING ELSE TO SAY?
Just for whom do you think I got all dressed up?
Hmm
I DON'T KNOW WHO IS THE LUCKY GIRL YOU'RE MEETING AT THE MATCH-MAKER, BUT IF IT'S SOMEONE YOUR HONORED FATHER CHOSE, I'M SURE YOU CAN'T GO WRONG.
Smile
I HOPE YOU TWO WILL BE VERY HAPPY.
COME ON! YOU KNOW THAT'S NOT—
WELL, IF IT ISN'T THE LITTLE LORDLING FROM MASTER OU'S HOUSE.

OH! HELLO, KOCHO!
GOOD MORNING.


WHAT IS IT THIS TIME, BOY? YOU'VE COME TO TRY TO WOO SHUREI AGAIN? YOU CERTAINLY DON'T LEARN, DO YOU?
BUT IF YOU WAIT UNTIL NIGHTFALL, I CAN PLAY WITH YOU A LITTLE.
I'LL LEAVE A SPOT ON MY SCHEDULE OPEN JUST FOR YOU. ♡
Y...
Yes, ma'am...
REEL
WOW...
WAIT A MINUTE!
"KO-CHO"?!
DID SHUREI CALL HER "KO-CHO"?!
GRIN

A single night with her is said to cost more than several lifetimes' worth of income for a peasant.
The top courtesan at Kogaro, the exclusive pleasure house...
She is famous for being the most sought-after courtesan in Kiyo.
SHE'S THAT KOCHOZ!
URGH...
EVEN FOR A HOUSEHOLD AS RICH AS MINE, ALL OUR WEALTH COULDN'T BUY EVEN TWO NIGHTS WITH HER...
SH-SHUREI— I'LL SEE YOU LATER!
GETTING A RESER-VATION TO SPEND A NIGHT WITH HER IS THE BEGINNING OF THE END...
SHOCK
THE DESTROYER OF PRESTIGIOUS HOUSE-HOLDS!

KO-KOCHO...
AND HE ONLY COMES TO BOTHER YOU WHEN SEIRAN ISN'T AROUND. HOW MUCH WOULD YOU WAGER THAT HE'S A BIT LACKING BETWEEN THE LEGS?
HE DOESN'T SEEM UP FOR A CHALLENGE.
Dash!
I WON'T LET SOME SILLY BOY MAKE CLUMSY ADVANCES TOWARD YOU WHILE YOU'RE HERE AT KOGARO...
...SHUREI. ♡

Chapter 19

EH?!
SOMEONE LEFT IN THE MIDDLE OF THEIR APPOINT-MENT WITH YOU?!
WELL, THERE ARE FOOLISH MEN AS WELL AS WISE, AFTER ALL.
MY CLIENT LAST NIGHT HAD TO LEAVE, SO I GOT A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP.
...KOCHO.
YOU ARE CERTAINLY UP EARLY TODAY...
YES.
YOU SAID YOUR LAST DAY WOULD BE SEVEN DAYS FROM NOW, RIGHT?
BUT THANKS TO THAT, I'M GETTING TO SPEND A BIT MORE TIME WITH YOU, SHUREI. WHAT A SHAME YOU'LL BE LEAVING US SOON.
WITH IMPECCABLE MANNERS, THE LITTLE LADY OF THE HONG HOUSEHOLD CAME TO US.
I KNEW AT FIRST GLANCE THAT YOU WERE THE DAUGHTER OF THE FAMOUS TEACHER HONG.
PLEASE!
PLEASE LET ME WORK HERE.
...THAT DAY WHEN A LITTLE GIRL SHOWED UP ALL BY HERSELF AT OUR DOORSTEP...
MY NAME IS SHUREI HONG.
I STILL REMEM-BER...

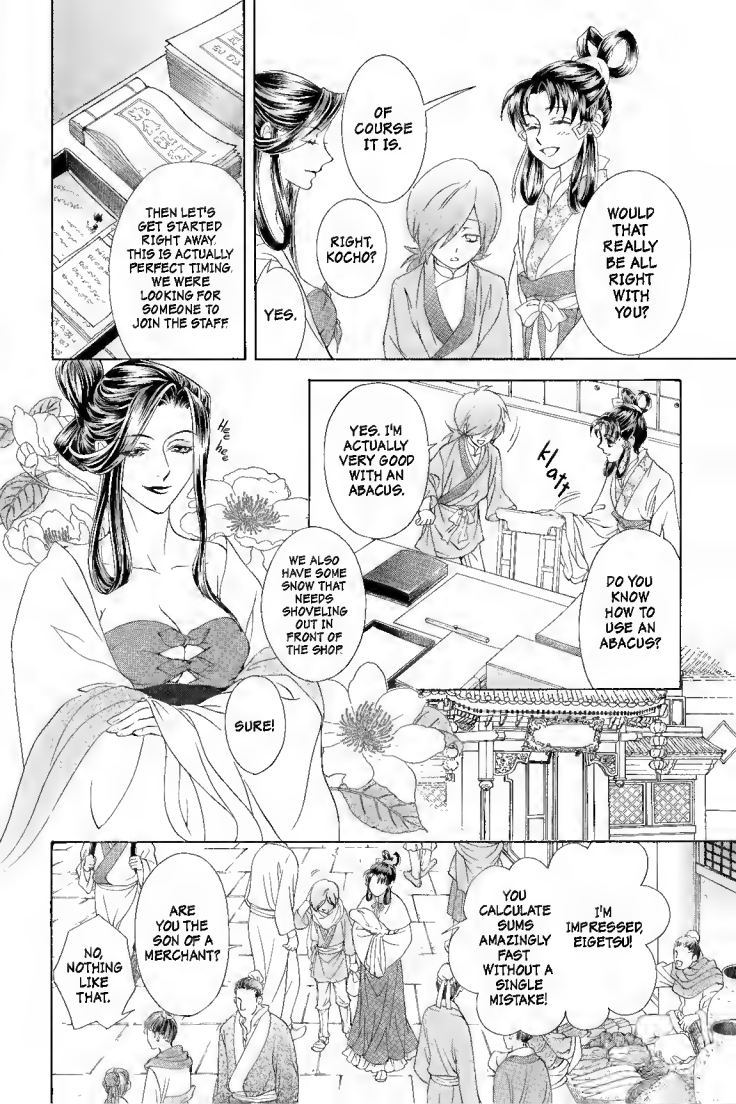
REALLY, WHAT USE WOULD A COURTESAN BE IF SHE LEFT WORK BEFORE SUNDOWN?
SIGH
I-I ASKED YOU TO PLEASE FORGET ABOUT ALL THAT, KOCHO!
YOU SAID IT SO SERIOUSLY!
BUT SINCE I NEED TO GET HOME IN TIME TO PREPARE THE EVENING MEAL, PLEASE LET ME FINISH WORK BY SUNSET EVERY DAY.
YOU HAD SUCH A DETERMINED LOOK ON YOUR LITTLE FACE THAT I THOUGHT YOU'D COME PREPARED TO BEGIN A LIFE AS A COURTESAN, BUT...
HOW IS FATHER FAMOUS?
UHH
SHUREI, I HAVE A GIFT I'D LIKE TO GIVE YOU ON YOUR LAST DAY OF WORK. BE SURE TO COME SEE ME, ALL RIGHT?
OH! YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO—
BOW
I AM GRATEFUL.
BUT THANKS TO YOUR HELP, I WAS ABLE TO GET THIS JOB DOING BOOKKEEPING FOR KOGARO...
IF YOU DON'T COME SEE ME, I'LL JUST HAVE TO LET IT SLIP TO MASTER SHOKA AND SEIRAN THAT YOU'VE HAD A PART-TIME JOB IN THE RED-LIGHT DISTRICT.
JOLT
IT'S A PROMISE, THEN.
KOCHO...
HONESTLY, SHUREI, YOU'RE THE FIRST PERSON WHO'S EVER MADE ME DO THE ASKING FOR SPENDING SOME PRIVATE TIME TOGETHER.
COME NOW. DON'T BE SO DISTANT.

I-I'LL COME SEE YOU! I PROMISE TO COME SEE YOU, SO—
EVEN IF YOU DO LEAVE BEFORE OUR USUAL BUSINESS HOURS EACH NIGHT, YOU STILL HAVE TO MAKE QUITE AN EFFORT TO HIDE THE FACT THAT YOU WORK HERE. AND YET YOU'VE STAYED ON WITH US FOR SO LONG...
BLUNT
I thought I'd already explained...
IT'S BECAUSE THE PAY HERE IS BETTER THAN ANYWHERE ELSE.
SIGH
AH, THAT REMINDS ME. WE RECEIVED AN UNUSUAL GUEST LAST NIGHT.
BAM BAM BAM
CRASH
GUEST?
I'm still sleepy...
fret fret fret
Keep it down, you!
VEEN VEEN
KOCHO...
HUH?
IT LOOKS AS IF HE'S ONLY 12 OR 13. PLEASE TELL ME HE ISN'T AS YOUNG AS HE LOOKS.
I TOLD YOU HE WAS AN UNUSUAL GUEST.
SOUNDS LIKE HE'S WOKEN UP.

WHERE...
WHERE AM I?
UM, EIGETSU TOH IS YOUR NAME, RIGHT?
YES.
I JUST ARRIVED IN KIYO YESTERDAY, AND I STARTED LOOKING FOR A PLACE TO STAY. I REMEMBER GETTING LOST, AND THEN...
YOU DON'T REMEMBER HOW YOU GOT HERE?

SO YOU'RE NOT FROM KIYO.
NO...
YOU DON'T KNOW ANYONE WHO LIVES HERE?
I...CAME HERE ON SOME BUSINESS. I WAS EXPECTING TO STAY AT LEAST A MONTH, BUT...
I NEVER IMAGINED THE CAPITAL WOULD BE SO HUGE.
Peek
UM...
H-HOW DID I GET HERE...?
Glint
Glint
ONE OF MY CLIENTS BROUGHT YOU IN.
HE ASKED ME TO LET YOU STAY FOR A BIT.
HUH?!
B-BUT I COULDN'T POSSIBLY IMPOSE ON A STRANGER! HOW MUCH DO YOU CHARGE FOR LODGING HERE?
SINCE HE'S A VERY DEAR AND IMPORTANT CLIENT OF MINE, AND HE LEFT QUITE A SUM OF MONEY TO COVER YOUR EXPENSES, I AGREED.
I'LL PAY WHAT I OWE YOU, SO PLEASE RETURN YOUR CLIENT'S MONEY TO HIM!
HUH?
I'VE GOT MONEY RIGHT HERE—
Sip

B-BUT YESTERDAY I HAD MUCH MORE THAN THIS! W-WHAT SHALL I DO?
WITH THAT AMOUNT, I'M AFRAID YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO AFFORD LODGING ANYWHERE FOR A MONTH.
AAH! WHY IS THERE SO LITTLE LEFT?!
AND HONESTLY, IF YOU HEAR HOW MUCH A NIGHT HERE COSTS, YOUR EYES WOULD PROBABLY POP OUT OF YOUR HEAD IN SHOCK...
BUT...
YES, YOU SHOULD STAY. IF HE WAS ONE OF KOCHO'S BEST CLIENTS, I'M SURE HE HAS MORE THAN ENOUGH MONEY TO COVER IT.
...
WHY NOT JUST ACCEPT MY CLIENT'S KINDNESS AND STAY AWHILE?
NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU HAD, I CAN GUARANTEE IT WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ENOUGH TO PAY FOR ONE NIGHT HERE.
IT WON'T BE ANYTHING FANCY, BUT WHAT DO YOU THINK?
IT'S NOT IN THE BEST CONDITION, BUT WE HAVE PLENTY OF ROOM. WE'RE USED TO HAVING GUESTS DROPPING IN TO STAY WITH US. IF YOU COULD HELP US OUT A BIT WITH HOUSEWORK, YOU WOULDN'T EVEN HAVE TO PAY RENT.
IN THAT CASE, WHY NOT COME AND STAY AT MY HOUSE WHILE YOU'RE IN KIYO?
HUH?
HOW ABOUT IF YOU WORKED HERE WITH ME?
UH... YES. IF I COULD DO THAT...
IF YOU DID SOME ODD JOBS AROUND HERE, YOU'D FEEL A LITTLE BETTER ABOUT IT, RIGHT?


WOULD THAT REALLY BE ALL RIGHT WITH YOU?
OF COURSE IT IS.
RIGHT, KOCHO?
YES.
THEN LET'S GET STARTED RIGHT AWAY. THIS IS ACTUALLY PERFECT TIMING. WE WERE LOOKING FOR SOMEONE TO JOIN THE STAFF.
DO YOU KNOW HOW TO USE AN ABACUS?
Klatt
YES. I'M ACTUALLY VERY GOOD WITH AN ABACUS.
WE ALSO HAVE SOME SNOW THAT NEEDS SHOVELING OUT IN FRONT OF THE SHOP.
Hehehe
SURE!
I'M IMPRESSED, EIGETSU! YOU CALCULATE SUMS AMAZINGLY FAST WITHOUT A SINGLE MISTAKE!
ARE YOU THE SON OF A MERCHANT?
NO, NOTHING LIKE THAT.

WHAT'S GOING ON?
I THOUGHT WE WERE DINING AT A RESTAURANT TONIGHT, SO I CAME TO PICK YOU UP AT WORK.
OVER HERE.
SEI-RAN?!
MY LADY.
IT IS PERHAPS A BIT BELATED, BUT WE THOUGHT WE WOULD GO OUT TO CELEBRATE YOUR PASSING THE PRELIMINARY EXAM.
What are you thinking, Seiran?!
IT'S TOO EXPEN-SIVE!
WE'RE EATING OUT?!
The Prelim-inary Exam.
In order to make Shurei eligible for the upcoming Civil Exam in just a few months, the Preliminary Exam was proposed.
Normally, those who wish to take the Imperial Civil Exam must pass a series of smaller tests over the course of the preceding year.
WE MUST DETERMINE WHETHER YOU QUALIFY TO SIT FOR THE CIVIL EXAM.

IF YOU CAN PASS THIS PRELIMINARY EXAM, WE SHALL RECOGNIZE YOU AS WORTHY OF TAKING THE IMPERIAL CIVIL EXAM.
WHEN I RECEIVED MY TEST RESULTS, I COULDN'T STOP SHAKING...
...BECAUSE I HAD TAKEN THE FIRST, HUGE STEP TOWARD MAKING MY DREAM COME TRUE.
THANK YOU, SEIRAN.
IT'S MY PLEASURE.
OH, I ALMOST FORGOT. WOULD IT BE ALL RIGHT IF THIS BOY JOINED US TONIGHT, SEIRAN?
MY LADY, THE BOY IN QUESTION...
...WOULDN'T BE THAT ONE THERE, WOULD IT?
OH NO! WAIT! WAIT JUST A MINUTE, YOU—
EI-GETSU?!
WAIT— WHERE DID HE GO?!

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?
FATHER?
WHUMP
WHUMP
HUH?
NEVER MIND THEM. ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, EIGETSU?
Y-YES.
You need to be more careful!
WHAT HAPPENED TO THOSE TWO?
WHAT INDEED? THEY SUDDENLY SPUN ABOUT AND COLLAPSED ON THE GROUND...
SO YOU MET WITH TROUBLE AS SOON AS YOU ARRIVED.
I SEE. YOU'RE FROM KOKU PROV-INCE...

THE IMPERIAL CIVIL EXAM IS ABOUT TO BEGIN, SO THERE'S A LARGE INFLUX OF TRAVELERS TO THE CITY AT THIS TIME OF YEAR. IT CAN BE DANGEROUS FOR SOMEONE UNFAMILIAR WITH KIYO TO COME HERE ALONE AT THIS TIME.
WHATEVER YOUR ERRAND IS, YOU'D BEST HURRY AND FINISH IT SO YOU CAN GET HOME QUICKLY.
RIGHT...
OH, MISTER SOU! YOU BROUGHT US AN EXTRA DISH WE DIDN'T ORDER.
HUH?
BUT WHEN YOU RETURN, BE SURE TO COME BACK AND HELP US WITH THE LEDGER-KEEPING AGAIN, WILL YOU?
I HEARD YOU'VE BEEN GOING AROUND TOWN SAYING YOUR FAREWELLS TO PEOPLE, SHUREI. THIS IS MY LITTLE GOOD-BYE GIFT TO YOU.
IT'S MY TREAT.
MR. SOU...
Ha ha ha!
Thank you, Mr. Sou!
OF COURSE! BUT REMEMBER I CHARGE AN EXTRA COPPER RYO FOR LEDGER WORK!
OF COURSE.

THANK YOU, SEIRAN. IT DOES LOOK GOOD.
tup
MY LADY, THE FOUR-STYLE DUCK DISH IS DELICIOUS. PLEASE TRY SOME.
SAY, HAVE YOU HEARD THE CRAZY RUMORS GOING AROUND?
THEY SAY SOME KID IS GOING TO TAKE THE IMPERIAL CIVIL EXAM THIS YEAR!
B-BMP
BETTER YET— A WOMAN IS TAKING IT TOO!
YEAH, I'VE HEARD THE RUMORS TOO.
APPARENTLY SOME BOY OF 16 OR 17 FROM HEKI PROVINCE IS THE POPULAR FAVORITE TO BE THE TOP SCORER THIS YEAR.
I'M PUTTING ALL MY MONEY ON HIM TO TAKE FIRST PLACE.
HA! DIDN'T YOU DO THE EXACT SAME THING A FEW YEARS AGO AND END UP LOSING EVERY-THING?

I REMEMBER. THERE WERE TWO YOUNGSTERS THAT TIME TOO. IT CAUSED A BIG UPSET THAT THEY TOOK BOTH FIRST AND SECOND PLACE. WHAT A SHOCK THAT WAS!
DO THEY MEAN MASTER KOYU AND GENERAL RANZ!
YEP, THAT WAS IT. BOTH PRIVILEGED BRATS FROM RIDICULOUSLY RICH HOUSEHOLDS, WEREN'T THEY?
SPECIALLY GROOMED GENIUSES, RIGHT?
MUST BE NICE TO LIVE SO COMFORTABLY THAT THERE'S NO NEED TO DO ANY-THING BUT STUDY AND ENSURE A CUSHY FUTURE FOR YOURSELF AS A CIVIL SERVANT.
BUT I'VE NEVER HEARD SUCH NONSENSE AS THIS TALK OF LETTING A WOMAN TAKE THE TEST.
KLENK
HOW COULD A WOMAN EVEN PASS THE QUALIFIERS TO GET TO THE FINAL ROUND?
ABSOLUTELY! AND WHAT IF SHE PASSES THE EXAM? IT'S NOT LIKE SHE CAN DO ANYTHING WITH HER QUALIFI-CATION.
SK
ARGH!
?!
K.
RA
SH

WHAT JUST HAP-PENED?
WHAT IN-DEED?
SHALL WE EAT BEFORE OUR FOOD GETS COLD?
...
EIGETSU, HAVE SOME BROTH AND WARM YOURSELF UP.
OH... ALL RIGHT.
NO ONE EVER GAINS ANYTHING WORTHWHILE WITHOUT PUTTING SOME HARD WORK AND PERSEVERANCE INTO IT, YOU KNOW.

JUST LOOK AT GENERAL RAN AND MASTER KOYU.
IN THE BEGINNING, THOSE TWO WERE SOUNDLY SCOFFED AT AND DERIDED FOR BEING TOO YOUNG. BUT BY WORKING HARD AND PERSEVERING, THEY WERE ABLE TO MAKE THEIR DETRACTORS TAKE BACK THEIR WORDS.
IN THE END, THAT'S REALLY ALL YOU NEED TO DO.
THANK YOU, FATHER.

Chapter 20
WE EVEN HAVE WINE.
WOULD YOU LIKE SOME, EIGETSU?
HUH?
WHAT AN INCREDIBLE FEAST THIS IS!
N-NO, THANK YOU!!
flub
I-I'M JUST FINE WITH TEA!
YOU DON'T LIKE WINE?
flub
N-NO, IT'S JUST THAT I GET DRUNK VERY EASILY, SO...
I TRY NOT TO EVEN SMELL IT IF AT ALL POSSIBLE...
OH MY.
THEN WE'LL JUST LEAVE THE WINE TO FATHER AND SEIRAN, SHALL WE? YOU AND I CAN FILL UP ON FOOD!
YES.
phoo

EIGETSU... I THINK YOU MIGHT HAVE BEEN ROBBED BY SOME HOODLUM LAST NIGHT.
YOU'RE MISSING A LOT OF MONEY, AREN'T YOU?
UM.. I'M NOT SURE ANYONE COULD HAVE ROBBED ME WHILE I WAS IN THAT STATE...
klup
THOUGH CONSIDERING THIS IS THE CAPITAL CITY, I SUPPOSE THERE MIGHT BE ONE OR TWO PEOPLE STRONG ENOUGH..
Maybe...
?
Oh, this is yummy..
IF ANYONE ROBBED HIM, IT WAS PROBABLY THE BLUE SCARF GANG.
THE BLUE SCARF GANG?
THEY'RE A BAND OF LOWLIFES THAT HAS RECENTLY GAINED SOME POWER IN OUR CITY'S UNDER-WORLD.
YOU CAN IDENTIFY THEM BY THE BLUE SASHES THEY WEAR AROUND THEIR WAISTS.
IT SEEMS THEY'VE STEPPED ON A FEW TOO MANY TOES LATELY. THE SYNDICATE BOSSES WILL PROBABLY STEP IN SOON TO SUPPRESS THEM.
BUT WITH THINGS SO BUSY DURING EXAM SEASON, IT COULD GET MESSY.
TRUE.

HOW SO?
PROBABLY NOT... HE DOESN'T SEEM TO REALIZE THAT HIS ACTIONS WILL SOON LEAD HIS GANG TO RUIN.
BUT THE HEAD OF THE BLUE SCARF GANG ISN'T A NATIVE OF KIYO, IS HE?
JURISDIC-TION...?
THE KEY IS THE CLEAR SEPARATION BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT'S JURISDICTION AND THAT OF THE LOWER CITY'S.
KIYO IS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER PROVINCE CAPITALS IN THAT IT IS ALSO THE SEAT OF THE EMPEROR. THEREFORE IT BEHOOVES ALL PARTIES INVOLVED TO KEEP THIS CITY RELATIVELY PEACEFUL.
I SEE...
THEY'RE A NECESSARY EVIL, PERHAPS, BUT THE GOVERNMENT HAS A TACIT UNDERSTANDING WITH THEM AND ALLOWS THEM TO POLICE THEIR OWN TERRITORY.
THIS COALITION OF THE UNDERWORLD'S LEADERS IS KNOWN AS THE SYNDICATE.
YES. THE HEADS OF ALL THE MAJOR UNDERWORLD ORGANIZATIONS IN KIYO COLLECTIVELY CONTROL AND REGULATE ALL THE SMALL-TIME CRIMINALS IN THE LOWER CITY.

WHEN THERE IS A LARGE NUMBER OF VISITORS IN THE CAPITAL FOR THE CIVIL EXAM, CRIME INCREASES AS WELL.
THE FACT THAT THE CITY CAN GET THROUGH THIS TIME OF YEAR WITHOUT ANY MAJOR INCIDENTS IS A TESTAMENT TO THE CURRENT STRENGTH OF THE SYNDICATE.
INDEED, IF ANYONE IN THE LOWER CITY SO MUCH AS UTTERS A WORD ABOUT HOW EASY THE PICKINGS ARE DURING EXAM TIME...
...THE SYNDICATE CRACKS DOWN EVEN HARDER.
IF THEY DIDN'T, THEY KNOW THE POLICE WOULD ENTER THEIR TERRITORY, WHICH WOULD CAUSE THEM TROUBLE LATER.
HOW DO YOU KNOW SO MUCH ABOUT ALL THESE THINGS, FATHER? I THOUGHT YOU SPENT EVERY DAY PENT UP IN THE IMPERIAL ARCHIVES?
ACK
Oh...!
THAT'S NOT IMPORTANT! WE SHOULD BE DISCUSSING EIGETSU'S TROUBLES.
UH... UM, I'M FINE NOW.

OH? IT WAS MONEY FROM YOUR VILLAGE?
THERE'S ONLY A LITTLE LEFT NOW, BUT PLEASE TAKE IT—
ESPECIALLY AFTER EVERYONE IN MY VILLAGE CHIPPED IN TO GIVE ME THE MONEY TO COME HERE.
I COULDN'T POSSIBLY IMPOSE ON YOU MORE.
Z!
W-WHAT IS?!
IT... IT'S GONE!!
PLEASE EXCUSE ME, MISS SHUREI! I'LL SEE YOU BACK AT THE HOUSE!!
BAM
DO YOU EVEN KNOW WHERE WE LIVE?!
EI-GETSU?

EIGETSU!
WAIT!
OH
EIGETSU?!
A BLUE SASH AT HIS WAIST...
IS HE PART OF THE BLUE SCARF GANG?!
HEY! IT'S YOU, AIN'T IT? THE BRAT WHO STOLE THE MONEY I LOVINGLY GAVE MY BOYS FOR A NIGHT ON THE TOWN?!
WHAT?! I-I WOULD NEVER DO SUCH A THING!

AND THOSE WERE OUR PRECIOUS WAR FUNDS YOU STOLE! I'LL RIP YOUR BELLY OPEN AND DRAG YOUR ENTRAILS OUT INCH BY INCH TO GET 'EM BACK IF I HAVE TO!
DON'T THINK A SIMPLE "SORRY" WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE AFTER YOU BEAT UP MY MEN!
BOW
YOU'VE GOT SOME NERVE, YOU LITTLE RAT.
BOW
I'M SORRY!
I'M SORRY!
OH
LAST NIGHT...
...WHAT HAPPENED TO "ME" LAST NIGHT!
THAT'S RIGHT! THESE MEN WOULD KNOW...
UM, PARDON ME, BUT... DID YOU HAPPEN TO SEE IF I DROPPED A TABLET ABOUT THIS SIZE SOMEWHERE LAST NIGHT?
THERE WERE LETTERS WRITTEN ON BOTH THE FRONT AND BACK OF IT. IT WAS A LITTLE DIRTY...
TABLET?
Move!
WHO'S THIS LITTLE GIRL?
HONESTLY, EIGETSU! IS THIS REALLY THE TIME OR PLACE TO BE ASKING THAT?!

WHY YOU LITTLE...
How dare he ignore us?!
A TABLET, HUH? WE'VE GOT TABLETS.
BUT MISS SHUREI, IT'S REALLY IMPORTANT!
WE'VE GOT PLENTY BECAUSE THE BOSS HAS BEEN ORDERING US TO COLLECT THEM LATELY.
HUH?
...BUT WE'LL HAVE TO KILL YOU FIRST.
KRICK
KRICK
!
GRAB
YOU CAN COME BACK TO OUR BASE AND HAVE A LOOK, IF YOU LIKE.

DASH
MISS SHUREI! PLEASE STOP—
I WON'T!
BELIEVE ME, THERE'S NO REASONING WITH THOSE MEN!
GET BACK HERE!
I... I GUESS YOU'RE RIGHT, BUT...
BUT NOTHING! RUN AS FAST AS YOU CAN!
TMP
TMP
TMP
OKAY!
WAS WHAT THEY SAID TRUE?
WHY WOULD THEY ACCUSE YOU OF STEALING THEIR MONEY?! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA?
NO... AND YES.
WHICH IS IT?!
THERE THEY ARE!

I'M THE ONE THEY'RE TARGETING. YOU MUST RUN AWAY!
MISS SHUREI!
THEY'RE NOT MAGICALLY MULTIPLYING, ARE THEY?!
ACK! OH NO!!
THERE'S MORE OF THEM!
TMP
TMP
AS IF I COULD DO A THING LIKE THAT! YOU'D NEVER FIND YOUR WAY AROUND THE CITY ON YOUR OWN!
COME HERE, YOU!
GRIP
TAKE THAT!
AND THAT!
FWAK
FWAK
FWAK
OWCH!!
GYEH! OW!!
GLARE
SHAKK
THE ABACUS?
BAM
GYAH

AND ONE MORE FOR GOOD MEASURE!!
THUNK
COME ALONG, EIGETSU!
A-AMAZ-ING...
WHEN ACCOSTED BY STRANGE MEN, DISTRACT THEM AND THEN QUICKLY KICK THEM HARD BETWEEN THE LEGS.
AT LEAST, THAT'S WHAT SEIRAN TOLD ME...
...
SO I DID, THOUGH YOU CERTAINLY SURPASSED MY EXPECTATIONS, MY LADY.
JOLT

I WISH I COULD JUST CRAWL IN A HOLE SOMEWHERE AND BURY MYSELF...!!
AND THANKS TO YOU, I DIDN'T EVEN NEED TO STEP IN.
!!
SEIRAN...
Y-YOU SAW THAT?!
IF IT ISN'T TOO MUCH TROUBLE FOR YOU BOTH, WOULD YOU AND SEIRAN RETURN TO KOGARO WITH ME BRIEFLY?
WE'LL HAVE OUR OPERATIVES TAKE CARE OF ANY TROUBLESOME PEOPLE.
LADY SHUREI.
YES. I WAS SENT BY MISS KOCHO.
OH! YOU WORK AT KOGARO, DON'T YOU?

THAT SOUNDS LIKE A GOOD PLAN. KOGARO HAS ITS OWN SECURITY, SO WE SHOULD BE SAFE INSIDE FOR NOW.
HUH?
UM... TAKE CARE OF...?
LET'S HURRY, MY LADY.
WHAT'S GOING ON?
YOU TOO, EIGE-TSU.
SEIRAN?!
What's going on? You've lost me.
RETURN TO KOGARO?

EEK!
KRASH
YOU GOTTA BE KIDDING ME!
PASH
WE'RE THE BLUE SCARF GANG! WE'LL BE RUNNING THIS TOWN SOMEDAY, UNDERSTAND?!
AND YOU TELL ME SOME LITTLE BRAT STOPPED US AND GOT AWAY?!
SORRY, BOSS.
H-HE HAD SOME KIND OF ABACUS-WIELDING BARBARIAN GIRL WITH HIM. THEY RAN OFF SOME-PLACE ALONG WITH ANOTHER MAN.
TO KOGARO, EH?
TOUT
HEY, KEICHO!
Y-YES, SIR?
AIN'T KOGARO ONE OF THEM PLEASURE HOUSES?
YES SIR. THE VERY BEST IN KIYO.

HUH.
That reminds me, she actually invited me to go see her..♡
IT'S SAID THAT THE TOP COURTESAN KOCHO ONLY ACCEPTS CUSTOMERS WHO HAVE THOUSANDS OF GOLD RYO.
SNEER
MAYBE I'LL LET THEM SETTLE THEIR DEBT BY HANDING HER OVER TO ME.
SHE MUST BE QUITE A WOMAN.
YOOOOS
YOU BOYS CAN TAKE ANY OF THE OTHER BROADS THAT CATCH YER FANCY.
WHAT?!
TONIGHT AFTER WE TAKE CARE OF THAT MISERABLE BRAT, WE'LL EAT, DRINK AND MAKE MERRY TO OUR HEARTS' CONTENT!
IF I'M TO RULE THIS LITTLE TOWN SOMEDAY, I SHOULD HAVE ITS NUMBER ONE WOMAN.
WE'LL USE KOGARO AS OUR NEW BASE!

PACK YOUR BAGS, BOYS! WE'RE MOVING TONIGHT!!
...
SHU-REI?!
AN ABACUS-WIELDING BARBARIAN GIRL? IT COULDN'T BE...
SHUREI IS IN DANGER!
WHY WOULD YOU HAVE THEM TAKEN TO A BROTHEL OF ALL PLACES?!
BECAUSE IT WAS THE SAFEST PLACE I COULD THINK OF.
smile smile
A BROTH-EL?!

THE RED-LIGHT DISTRICT IS HARDLY A SAFE PLACE!!
DON'T BE SO NARROW-MINDED, KOYU. IT'S A PERFECTLY LOVELY PLACE.
WELL, NOT THAT ONE COULD EXPECT YOU TO KNOW AS YOU NEVER COME DOWN HERE.
Master Ran!
Later, later.
AND YOU COME HERE FAR TOO OFTEN!
Who is that woman?!
MASTER RAN! YOU ARE EARLY THIS EVENING.
AND YOU'VE BROUGHT TWO VERY FINE YOUNG LORDS WITH YOU. YOU SIMPLY MUST COME VISIT US!
Come over here, Lord Ran!
NO, NO! COME OVER HERE!
YOU HAVEN'T BEEN TO SEE US LATELY, AND IT MAKES US PINE FOR YOU SO!
IT SEEMS YOUR HANDSOME FRIEND ISN'T ACQUAINTED WITH THESE SORTS OF THINGS. I PROMISE I'LL BE VERY GENTLE WITH HIM AND SHOW HIM A NIGHT HE'LL NEVER FORGET!
BE SURE TO COME BY!
..!!

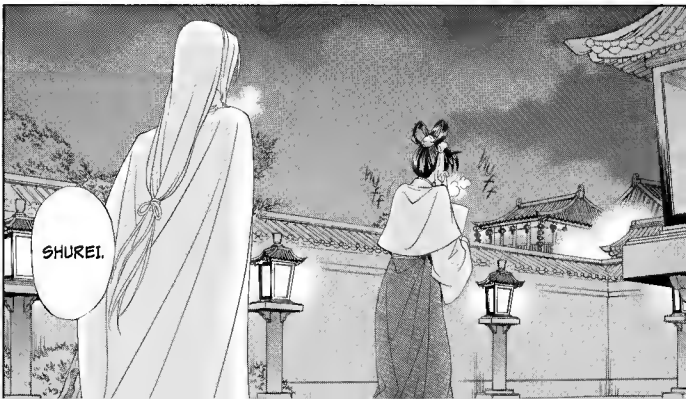
SHUEI, IS THIS PLACE YOUR PERSONAL INNER COURT?
HAS YOUR FILTHY MIND ROTTED ALL THE WAY THROUGH?!
I THINK SHE LIKES YOU, KOYU.
WHY NOT GO HAVE A LITTLE FUN AND MEET BACK WITH US LATER?
Oh.
Though you do have to pay money for it here.
YOU COULD SAY THAT... THOUGH THE LADIES HERE DON'T HAVE THE SAME SORTS OF GOALS THAT YOURS DO. I SUPPOSE YOU COULD THINK OF THIS PLACE AS EVERY MAN'S PERSONAL INNER COURT.
?!
I HOPE YOU'LL ENJOY SEEING IT.
AT THE PLEASURE HOUSE WE'RE GOING TO, YOU'LL FIND WOMEN AS GIFTED AND BEAUTIFUL AS THOSE THAT GRACE YOUR OWN INNER COURT, YOUR HIGHNESS.

AH, HERE WE ARE.
QUITE A PLACE, ISN'T IT?
THIS PLACE SUITS MY TASTES...
HOW UNUSUAL TO FIND YOU WAITING AT THE GATE...
LORD RAN.
KOCHO...
THERE'S BEEN A BIT OF TROUBLE. I SENT A LETTER TO YOUR MANOR...
...BUT I FEAR YOU MAY HAVE MISUNDER-STOOD MY MESSAGE.

THEY'RE COMPANIONS OF MINE WHO CAME TO MEET HIM AS WELL.
AHH
WHO ARE THESE TWO GENTLE-MEN?
WE— I HAVE RARELY SEEN A WOMAN SO BEAUTI-FUL.
TSK
MY LORD. YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE SPOKEN SO.
SHE COULD RIVAL EVEN SHUSUI.
A TRUE BEAUTY.
IF YOUR INTENT IS TO FLATTER, YOU MUSTN'T MENTION ANOTHER WOMAN.
I-I SEE.
Yes.
DO REMEMBER THAT.

WELL DONE. NOW KEEP WATCH OVER THE REAR ENTRANCE.
I HAVE BROUGHT MASTER HONG'S DAUGHTER AND HER COMPANIONS.
MA'AM!
SHUREI! COME IN!
SHU-REI?!
KOCHO!
IT'S SHUREI!
TUMP
TUMP
TUMP

LORD RAN, YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS SHOULD HURRY INSIDE AS WELL.
KA-
TH
AK
KRIIIK
KRIIIK
CLOSE THE GATE!
KREEK


SHUREI.

I'VE MISSED YOU—
HUH?!
SCOWL
YOU SNEAK OUT OF THE PALACE WITH GENERAL RAN AND MASTER KOYU TO VISIT BROTHELS...?
ACK
BROTHEL = EVERY MAN'S INNER COURT

Y-YOU'VE GOT IT ALL WRONG, SHUREI!
Oh? They know each other?
WE WOULDN'T COME TO SUCH A PLACE FOR THAT!
WE CAN HAVE THAT AS MUCH AS WE LIKE BACK AT HOME!
UM...
...

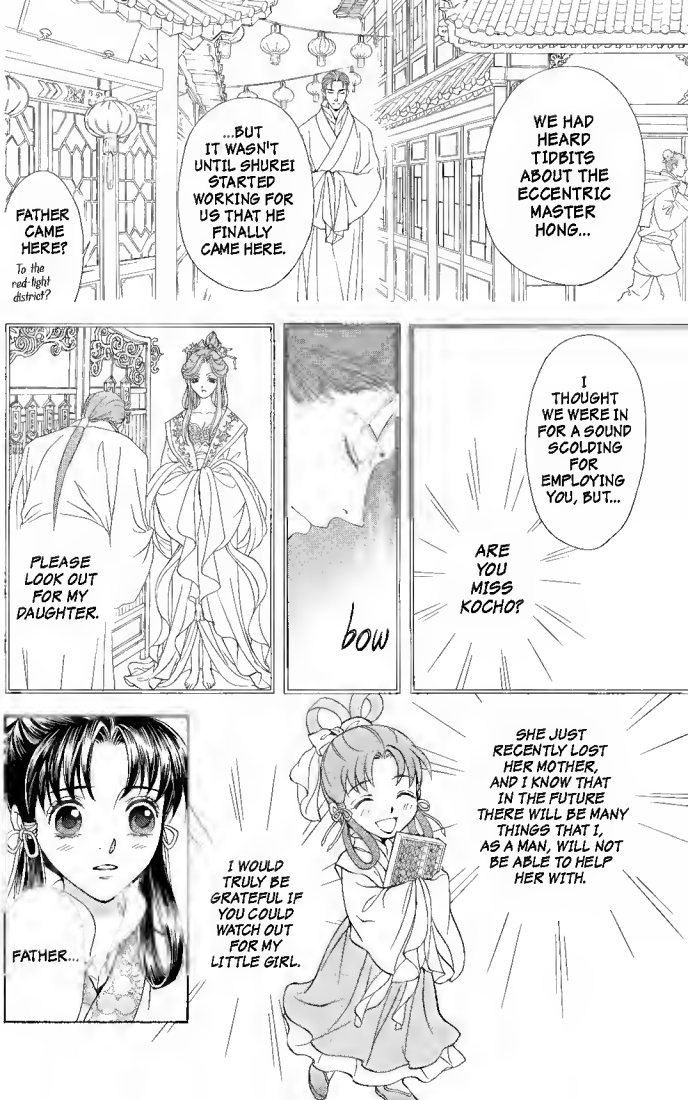
Chapter 21

The Story of
SAIUNKOKU

INDEED, I AM... BUT ARE YOU THE SAME BOY FROM LAST NIGHT?
JOLT
A-ARE YOU THE ONE WHO BROUGHT ME HERE LAST NIGHT?
BY THE TIME I'D CAUGHT UP WITH YOU, YOU WERE HALF-ASLEEP AND MUMBLING "TAKE ME TO THE BEST BROTHEL IN KIYO." SO I BROUGHT YOU HERE...
WAIT A MOMENT— DOES THAT MEAN YOU WERE THE CUSTOMER WHO ABANDONED KOCHO HALFWAY THROUGH HIS APPOINTMENT?
Ah!
WHICH WAS PERFECT, AS I'D INTENDED TO SPEND THE NIGHT HERE AS WELL.
TO THINK HE COULD WALK OUT ON KOCHO, WHO HAS DROVES OF MEN WILLING TO GO BANKRUPT JUST TO SPEND A SINGLE NIGHT WITH HER...
NO ORDINARY MAN WOULD DREAM OF DOING THAT.
GULP
THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE WEALTH OF THE RAN CLAN...
HE CERTAINLY HAS NERVE DOING THAT TO ME, DOESN'T HE?
YES, IT WAS HE.

BUT TO THINK I WOULD ENCOUNTER SUCH A GATHERING OF MEN EVEN MORE ATTRACTIVE THAN LORD RAN...

KOCHO, YOU COULD'VE AT LEAST SAID THEY WERE JUST AS ATTRACTIVE...
MY...
CONFIDENT, AREN'T YOU?
YOU DARE ASK FOR THAT MUCH PRAISE WHEN YOU SEE ME ONLY AS YOUR SOURCE FOR UNDERWORLD NEWS AND A CONNECTION TO THE HEADS OF THE SYNDICATE?
HMPH
EVEN IF OUR RELATIONSHIP IS SIMPLY FLIRTATION, I COULDN'T RESPECT A MAN WHO WON'T SPARE HIS FULL ATTENTION FOR A SINGLE NIGHT WITH A WOMAN WHO'S GIVING HIM HER ALL.
ZING
ALL THAT'S ATTRACTIVE ABOUT YOU ARE YOUR SILVER TONGUE, YOUR FACE, YOUR BODY, AND YOUR HEAVY PURSE.
UHH!
P-perhaps we should discuss this later?
...
SHOKA IS KNOWN IN THESE PARTS?
You were calling him Master Hong.
OF COURSE.


WE HAD HEARD TIDBITS ABOUT THE ECCENTRIC MASTER HONG...
...BUT IT WASN'T UNTIL SHUREI STARTED WORKING FOR US THAT HE FINALLY CAME HERE.
FATHER CAME HERE?
To the red-light district?
I THOUGHT WE WERE IN FOR A SOUND SCOLDING FOR EMPLOYING YOU, BUT...
ARE YOU MISS KOCHO?
bow
PLEASE LOOK OUT FOR MY DAUGHTER.
SHE JUST RECENTLY LOST HER MOTHER, AND I KNOW THAT IN THE FUTURE THERE WILL BE MANY THINGS THAT I, AS A MAN, WILL NOT BE ABLE TO HELP HER WITH.
I WOULD TRULY BE GRATEFUL IF YOU COULD WATCH OUT FOR MY LITTLE GIRL.
FATHER...

YOU KNEW ABOUT THIS TOO, SEIRAN?!
WHAT?
...
IN NO TIME AT ALL, THE PECULIAR "HONG HOUSE-HOLD" BECAME FAMOUS THROUGHOUT THE DISTRICT.
NOT LONG AFTER THAT, SEIRAN CAME AND MADE A NEARLY IDENTICAL ENTREATY TO ME AS WELL. IT WAS SO SIMILAR TO MASTER HONG'S THAT I NEARLY LAUGHED ALOUD!
B-BUT...
I TRIED SO HARD TO KEEP IT A SECRET...
THEY EVEN CAME TO LOOK IN ON YOU ONCE IN A WHILE.
HEH
THEY BECAME QUITE FAMOUS FOR THAT REASON AS WELL.
HUH?
NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES OUR GREATEST BEAUTIES OF THE NIGHT INVITED THEM, NEITHER WOULD GIVE IN TO TEMPTATION.
WHAT'S MORE...

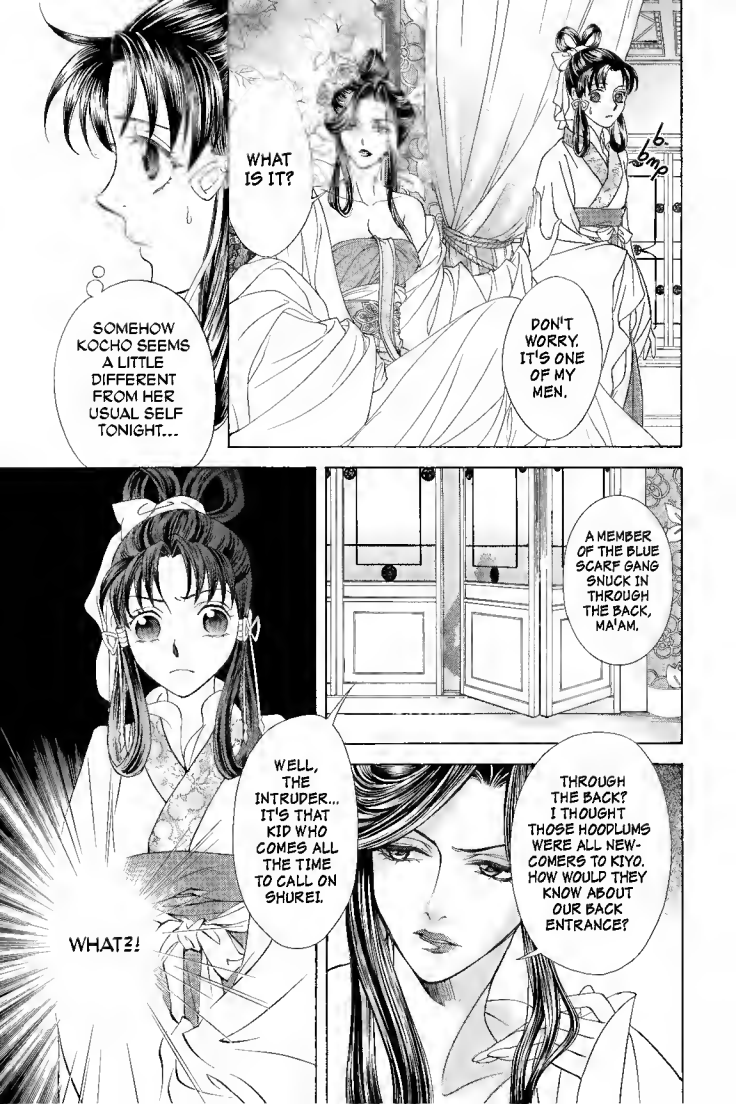
MISS KO-CHO!
AH, SEIRAN. FOR ALL MY LIFE, I'M SURE I'LL NEVER FORGET HOW BLUNTLY YOU REJECTED MY INVITATION.
THAT WAS REALLY SOME LINE YOU LEFT ME WITH.
BECAUSE EVEN IF YOU CRY AFTERWARDS, IT WON'T MOVE ME.
SEIRAN SAID THAT...?
MISS KOCHO!
Please, don't say any more!
Seiran said such a General Ran-sounding line...?
...
AGH
MY LADY!
WHAT A FRIGHTENING LIFE-FORM HE IS.
THAT'S THE FIRST TIME I'VE EVER SEEN SEIRAN LIKE THAT.
My brother is strong, kind, and also a bit of a bully...
...

IN ANY CASE, BOTH SHUREI AND THE BOY OUGHT TO STAY HERE AT KOGARO FOR A WHILE.
BRUTES LIKE THE ONES PURSUING YOU CAN BE VERY PERSISTENT.
BUT KOCHO, EIGETSU AND I CAN'T JUST STAY HERE FOREVER...
DON'T WORRY. YOU'LL NEED ONLY TO BE PATIENT AND WAIT FOR A FEW DAYS AT MOST. AND I'VE ALREADY SENT A MESSAGE TO MASTER SHOKA LETTING HIM KNOW.
A FEW DAYS AT MOST? WHY DO YOU SAY THAT?
YOU'LL SEE SOON ENOUGH.
I CAN'T STAY HERE.
SO PLEASE—
THERE'S SOMETHING I MUST GET BACK AT ANY COST.

STRANGE... WHEN I SAW YOU LAST NIGHT, IT LOOKED LIKE YOU WERE THE ONE TAKING THEIR THINGS.
YOU TOOK TEN GOLD RYO FROM THEM WITHOUT A SINGLE QUALM. I DON'T THINK YOU TOOK ANYTHING ELSE, BUT—
TEN GOLD RYO?!
I-I STOLE MONEY?!
DIDN'T YOU NOTICE IT IN YOUR MONEY POUCH?
OH, WELL, TO BE HONEST...
...THERE'S A LOT LESS THAN I ORIGINALLY HAD..
YOU'D BETTER TELL US THE ENTIRE STORY.
SO THIS SECOND PERSONALITY OF YOURS EMERGES WITHOUT WARNING SOMETIMES?
OH... NO, IT DOESN'T COME OUT AS LONG AS I DON'T DO THAT.
THAT?

GLARE
NOW STOP RIGHT THERE, ALL OF YOU!
EIGETSU IS IN TROUBLE, ISN'T HE?
IS THIS REALLY THE TIME FOR THIS?
UH...
AND WHY ARE YOU EVEN HERE IN THE FIRST PLACE?
YOU CAN HAVE "THAT" AS MUCH AS YOU LIKE AT HOME, CAN'T YOU?
SHUREI, WAIT!
I TOLD YOU IT WAS ALL A MISUNDER-STANDING, DIDN'T I?
I CAME HERE TO MEET HIM!
OH
EIGETSU?
THE EMPEROR AND HIS TWO CLOSEST ADVISORS STOLE OUT OF THE PALACE TO MEET EIGETSU?
WHY?

THAT REMINDS ME, EIGETSU...
YOU MENTIONED SOMETHING ABOUT A TABLET, RIGHT?
YES.
UM... IT'S A WOODEN TABLET...
A WOODEN TABLET...
Y-YES. IT SEEMS THAT WAS WHAT THOSE MEN WERE AFTER WHEN THEY APPROACHED ME YESTERDAY...
?
IT WAS JUST A TABLET MADE OF INEXPENSIVE WOOD, BUT IT'S... NOT EXACTLY AN ORDINARY TABLET...
THEY'RE COLLECTING TABLETS?!
YOU'RE SURE?
YES. THE MEN WHO CHASED ME TONIGHT MENTIONED IT.


SOMEHOW KOCHO SEEMS A LITTLE DIFFERENT FROM HER USUAL SELF TONIGHT...
WHAT IS IT?
DON'T WORRY. IT'S ONE OF MY MEN.
A MEMBER OF THE BLUE SCARF GANG SNUCK IN THROUGH THE BACK, MA'AM.
THROUGH THE BACK? I THOUGHT THOSE HOODLUMS WERE ALL NEW-COMERS TO KIYO. HOW WOULD THEY KNOW ABOUT OUR BACK ENTRANCE?
WELL, THE INTRUDER... IT'S THAT KID WHO COMES ALL THE TIME TO CALL ON SHUREI.
WHAT?!

SANTA, YOU DUMMY!!
HOW COULD YOU GET YOURSELF INVOLVED WITH THE BLUE SCARF GANG?!
URK
SHUT UP!
I TOOK A LOT OF RISKS TO GET BACK IN HERE BECAUSE I WAS WORRIED ABOUT YOU, OKAY?!
NO ONE ASKED YOU TO COME, IDIOT!
WHAT IS THEIR RELATION-SHIP...?
JUST CHILDHOOD FRIENDS. SOMEWHAT.
HE'S THE THIRD SON OF A MERCHANT, AND HE'S BEEN PURSUING LADY SHUREI FOR A LONG WHILE. I ALWAYS DRIVE HIM OFF FOR HER, BUT HE DOESN'T SEEM TO KNOW WHEN TO GIVE UP.
QUIT CALLING ME AN IDIOT! AND STOP YELLING!
OH, I HAVEN'T EVEN GOTTEN STARTED YET!
I even tossed him into a river in the dead of winter once, but...
I NEVER IMAGINED HE WAS STILL BOTHERING LADY SHUREI...
BRO— UM, I MEAN...
SEIRAN, IF HE'S CONTINUED PURSUING HER DESPITE YOUR RATHER TERRIFYING DISCOURAGE-MENT, DOESN'T THAT MEAN HE'S ACTUALLY RATHER... BRAVE?

MORE IMPORTANTLY, SHUREI—
WHO ARE THOSE MEN?!
They're all better-looking than I am, and they look richer too!
glint
glint
THEY'RE FRIENDS OF MINE. NEVER MIND THEM.
BUT I DO MIND! I MIND A LOT!!
MEN LIKE THAT MAY BE HANDSOME, BUT THEY'RE LOUTS!
THEY WON'T TAKE CARE OF YOU LIKE I WOULD! THEY'LL JUST TOY WITH YOU AND THEN ABANDON YOU!

GRAB
YOU DUMMY! YOU COULD'VE TOLD ME IF THINGS WERE SO BAD— OF COURSE I'LL PAY FOR YOUR FREEDOM FROM A BROTHEL! YOU SHOULD HAVE TOLD ME SOONER!
DON'T TELL ME YOUR FINANCIAL SITUATION IS SO BAD YOU'VE STARTED WORKING AS A COURTESAN?!
Poink
LIKE I WOULD...?
NOW HOLD ON!
Bah!
THIS IS RIDICU-LOUS.
MMMFF
WAIT! WE— I MEAN, I AM SHUREI'S EX—
—HUS-BAND...
FREEDOM FROM THE BROTH-EL?
I'VE ALWAYS KNOWN YOU WERE AN IDIOT, BUT I NEVER THOUGHT YOU WERE COMPLETELY STUPID!
SANTA!
WE DON'T HAVE TIME TO BE DISTRACTED BY YOUR RIDICULOUS LITTLE FANTASIES RIGHT NOW.
flick
OW!

UNLIKE YOU, EIGETSU HASN'T HAD MONEY SHOWERED UPON HIM BY HIS PARENTS.
EVERYONE IN HIS VILLAGE CHIPPED IN WITH WHAT LITTLE THEY HAD TO GIVE HIM ENOUGH TO COME TO THE CAPITAL!
DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT THE BLUE SCARF GANG DOES?
IF ILL CHANCE HADN'T LED EIGETSU AND THAT GANG TO CROSS PATHS LAST NIGHT, HE WOULDN'T HAVE LOST HIS MEMORIES, TRAVEL MONEY OR WOODEN TABLET AT ALL!
...
I...
HAVE YOU SUNK SO LOW THAT YOU COULD LIVE WITH YOURSELF AFTER JOINING A BAND OF CRIMINALS WHO'D STEAL MONEY FROM A CHILD?!
I...I WAS CAPTURED BY THE BLUE SCARF GANG...

I HAD BEEN DRINKING AT A TAVERN, AND THEY SURROUNDED ME WHEN I STEPPED OUTSIDE.
AFTER THEY TOOK MY MONEY THEY SAID, "WE COULD USE A KID LIKE HIM" AND TOOK ME BACK TO THEIR BASE.
WHY DIDN'T YOU ASK THE POLICE FOR HELP?
Ooh, you're a fancy one, ain't ya? I'll definitely get some use out of you.
Go buy me some wine.
THEY SAID IF I WORKED HARD, THEY'D MAKE ME A SUB-BOSS.
Whaaa?!
WOULD YOU REALLY WANT TO BE A MOB BOSS?!
I THOUGHT IF I DID THAT... I'D GAIN SOME STATUS OR SOMETHING.
I'D HAVE POWER...
...AND BE ABLE TO DISH OUT SOME PAYBACK.
Si...

I GUESS... I AM A SPOILED RICH KID..
Yes.
IT SEEMS YOU DO HAVE SOME DEGREE OF SELF-AWARENESS.
BUT THAT'S WHY I WANTED TO BE IN A POSITION OF POWER!
HMPH!
IT WOULD'VE BEEN NICE TO LOOK DOWN ON MY LOVE RIVALS TOO, BUT—
DEAD SERI-OUS
Love rivals?
APPARENT TO EVERYONE ELSE
IT'S
HER
HONESTLY, WHAT ARE YOU GOING ON ABOUT?
I DON'T KNOW WHO THIS GIRL IS THAT YOU'RE SO CRAZY ABOUT, BUT I'M POSITIVE THIS IS THE WRONG WAY TO GAIN HER AFFECTIONS!
GWAH HA HA HA!!
"HEY, I'M A MOB BOSS! AIN'T I SOMETHIN'?"
EVEN A GIRL SUCH AS I WOULD BE APPALLED BY THAT!
I'D SEVER TIES WITH YOU IMMEDI-ATELY!

I SEE...
KEICHO—OR WHATEVER YOUR NAME IS—WE COMPLETELY UNDERSTAND YOUR PAIN.
GLUM
WELL? NOW THAT YOU'VE PLAYED AT BEING A MOBSTER'S LACKEY, HAVE YOU GOTTEN ANY STRONGER? DO YOU THINK YOU CAN LOOK DOWN ON YOUR LOVE RIVALS NOW?
OF COURSE NOT!
SCOLD
THEY WERE SIMPLY USING YOU.
SCOLD
TEARY
NO MATTER WHAT YOU PRETEND TO BE, YOU'LL REMAIN A SPOILED RICH BOY.
BUT...
YOU WERE BRAVE ENOUGH TO COME HERE AND TELL US THE TRUTH.
MAYBE I DID UNDERESTIMATE YOU.
Pat
SHUREI.
Pat
I'M SORRY ABOUT BEFORE.
OH, IT'S FINE.

GWA HA HA!
IT WAS A GOOD IDEA TO STEAL THESE!
THE OWNERS WILL PAY ANYTHING WE ASK TO GET THEM BACK.
AND IT'S EASY TO SPOT TARGETS AROUND THE CITY GATES.
IT'S A GREAT BUSI-NESS!
I DON'T KNOW WHETHER WE HAVE YOURS OR NOT, BUT WE DO HAVE A LOT OF ODD WOODEN TABLETS AT THE BASE.
BUT WHERE IS MY TABLET NOW?
UNBELIEV-ABLE...
AND THAT'S WHY WE SHOULD HURRY UP AND LEAVE!
THEY INTEND TO MOVE INTO THIS PLACE TONIGHT...
NO. THIS MAKES THINGS EASIER FOR US.
YES.

NO.
WE WANT TO TAKE THEM ALIVE IF POSSIBLE. FOR CERTAIN REASONS...
AN EYE FOR AN EYE. IF THE PUNISHMENT DOES NOT FIT THE CRIME, IT IS NOT JUSTICE.
ONE MOMENT, LORD RAN. YOU DON'T INTEND TO BREAK YOUR LONG-STANDING ACCORD WITH THE UNDERWORLD, DO YOU?
THOSE FOOLS ARE OUR PESTS TO EXTERMINATE.
AGREED.
THOSE WHO MIGHT BE SENT FOR A LITTLE "SWIM" WOULD REMAIN OUR PRISONERS FOR A FEW DAYS BEFOREHAND REGARDLESS.
I'VE NEVER SEEN KOCHO LIKE THIS.
UM... KOCHO?
...
THOSE WHO STORM YOUR GATE ARE YOURS TO DEAL WITH AS YOU LIKE, OF COURSE.
THEN HOW ABOUT A SMALL CONCESSION? LEAVE THEM ALIVE UNTIL WE OBTAIN THE ITEM WE CAME FOR.

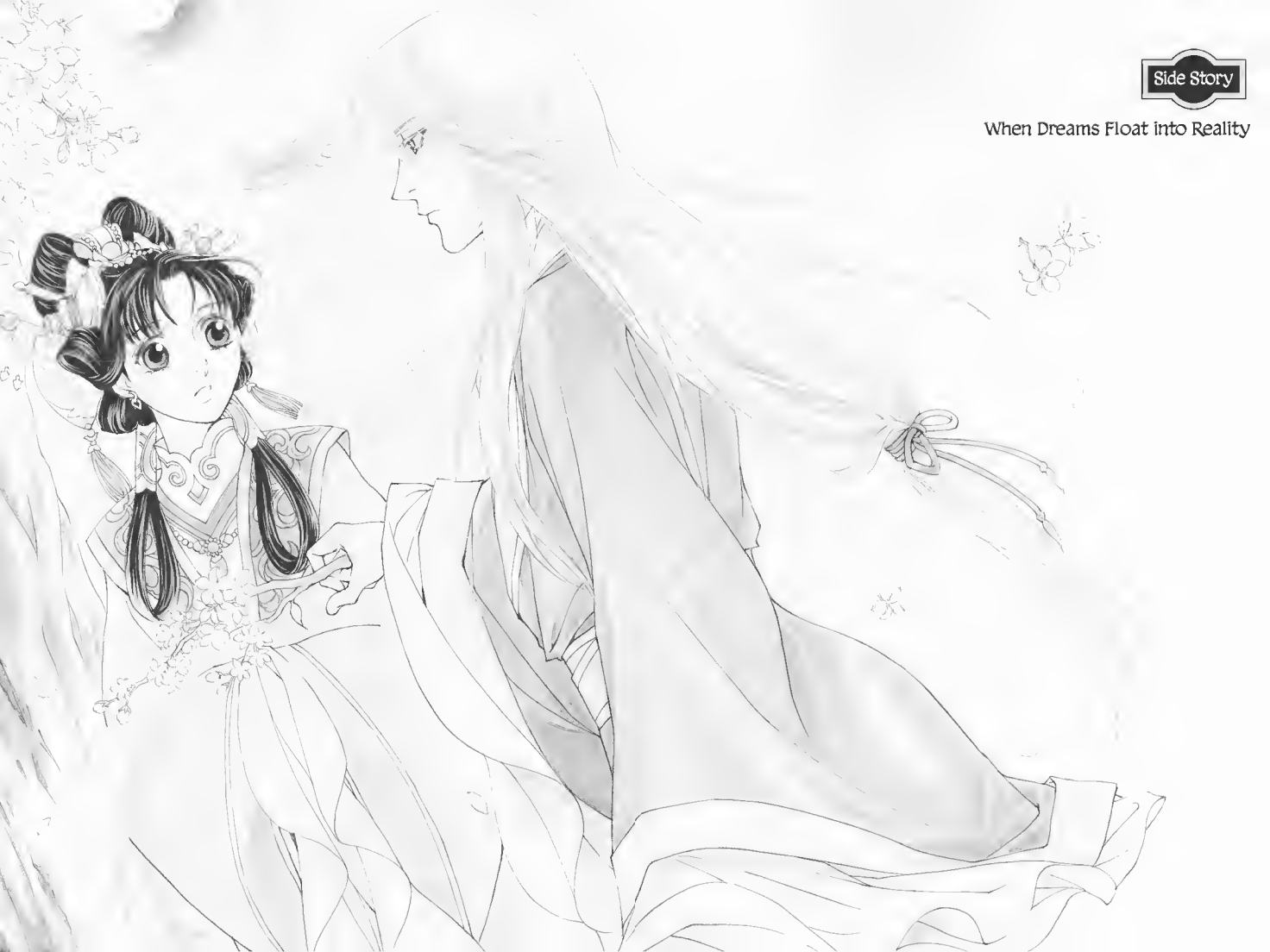
LADY SHUREI, I SHOULD PROBABLY EXPLAIN THAT KOCHO IS THE SYNDICATE HEAD OF THE RED-LIGHT DISTRICT. SHE LEADS AND CONTROLS ALL THE COURTESANS IN KIYO.
IT IS SAID SHE IS THE IRON-FISTED TYRANT WHO TRULY RULES THE SYNDICATE FROM THE SHADOWS.
WHAT...?!
K-KOCHO IS ONE OF THE HEADS OF THE SYNDICATE?
HOW HARSH, LORD RAN.
BUT I'M NOT ALTOGETHER WRONG, AM I?
AFTER ALL, ONE WORD FROM YOU AND EVEN A SYNDICATE BOSS WOULD BE BARRED FROM ALL THE PLEASURE HOUSES IN KIYO!
STOMP
STOMP

SO THIS IS KOGARO, HUH?
IT JUST REEKS OF MONEY, DON'T IT?
BUT, BOSS... ISN'T IT A LITTLE TOO QUIET?
SCOFF
SCARED?
DON'T GET JUMPY NOW THAT WE'RE AT THE HEART OF THE CAPITAL'S UNDERWORLD.
HEH
COME ON, YOU LUGS!!
YARGH
THOK
KRAK
KRAK
THOK
YARGH

THAT'S FAR ENOUGH!
SO YOU'VE COME AT LAST, YOU SHAMELESS PIGS...
...WITH SUCH SMUG, STUPID FACES.
YOU WILL REGRET EVER SETTING FOOT IN THIS PLACE.
CONSIDER THIS OUR RETRIBUTION FOR THE PAST WEEKS YOU'VE BEEN RUNNING AMOK ON OUR TURF. WE SHOW NO MERCY.
MY COLLEAGUES FROM THE SYNDICATE HAVE AMASSED FORCES AND CURRENTLY HAVE THIS PLACE SURROUNDED.
IT'S A BIT MORE HOSPITALITY THAN YOU MERIT, PERHAPS, BUT...
A WOMAN...?
I WON'T LET A SINGLE ONE OF YOU LEAVE HERE ALIVE, SO FEEL FREE TO THINK WHAT YOU WILL...
tak

NOW...
SLAUGHTER THEM!!

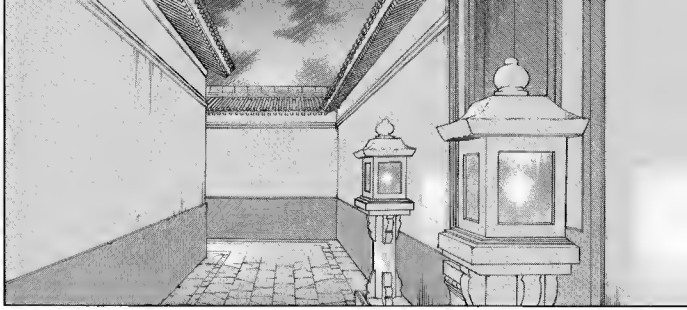
IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I'D STOPPED AND NOTICED THE CHERRY BLOSSOMS IN BLOOM.
I WAS SUD-DENLY STRUCK BY THE URGE TO TURN THAT GIRL AROUND TO FACE ME.



# When Dreams Float into Reality

The Story of
SAIUNKOKU

CHOK
tmp



I ALWAYS CAME HERE TO CRY...

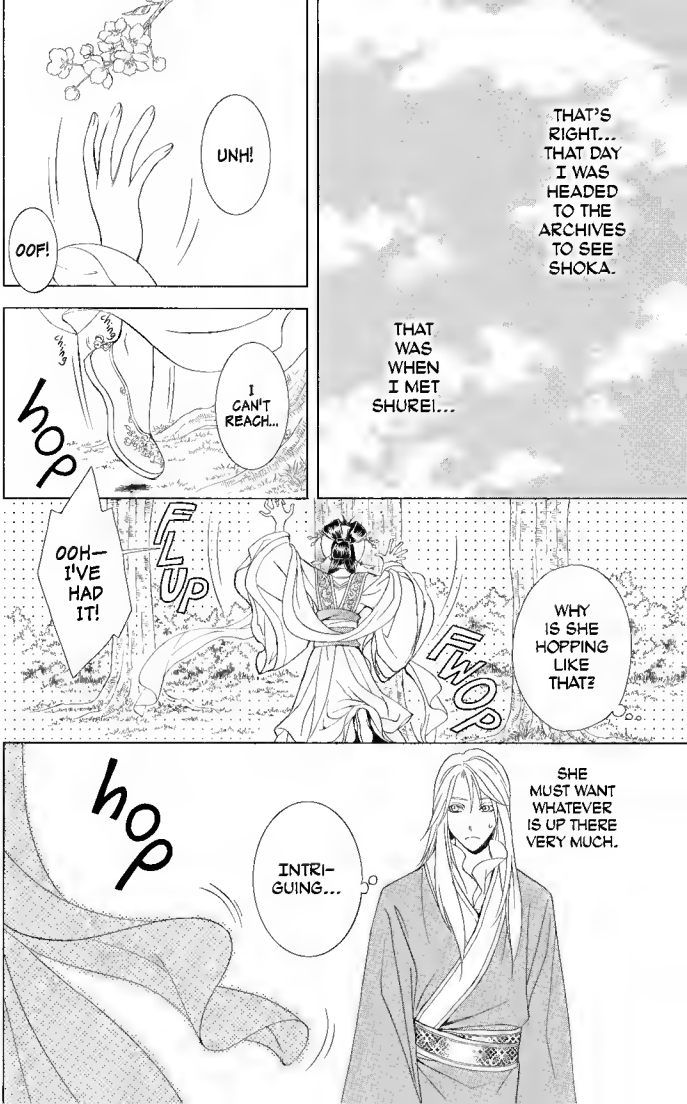
...AS THOUGH I HOPED SOMEONE MIGHT HEAR AND COME FIND ME. I NEVER STRAYED TOO FAR AWAY.
I BURIED MYSELF DEEP IN THE SHRUBBERY...
...BUT MADE SURE MY CRYING COULD STILL BE HEARD...
THE MOST THAT WOULD HAPPEN WAS MY OLDER BROTHERS COMING TO KICK ME ABOUT A BIT...
THAT WAS THE VERY BEST I COULD DO BACK THEN.
I CRIED ALONE.
MOST OF THE TIME NO ONE CAME.
STILL...
...EVEN THAT WAS PREFERABLE TO NO ONE COMING FOR ME AT ALL.

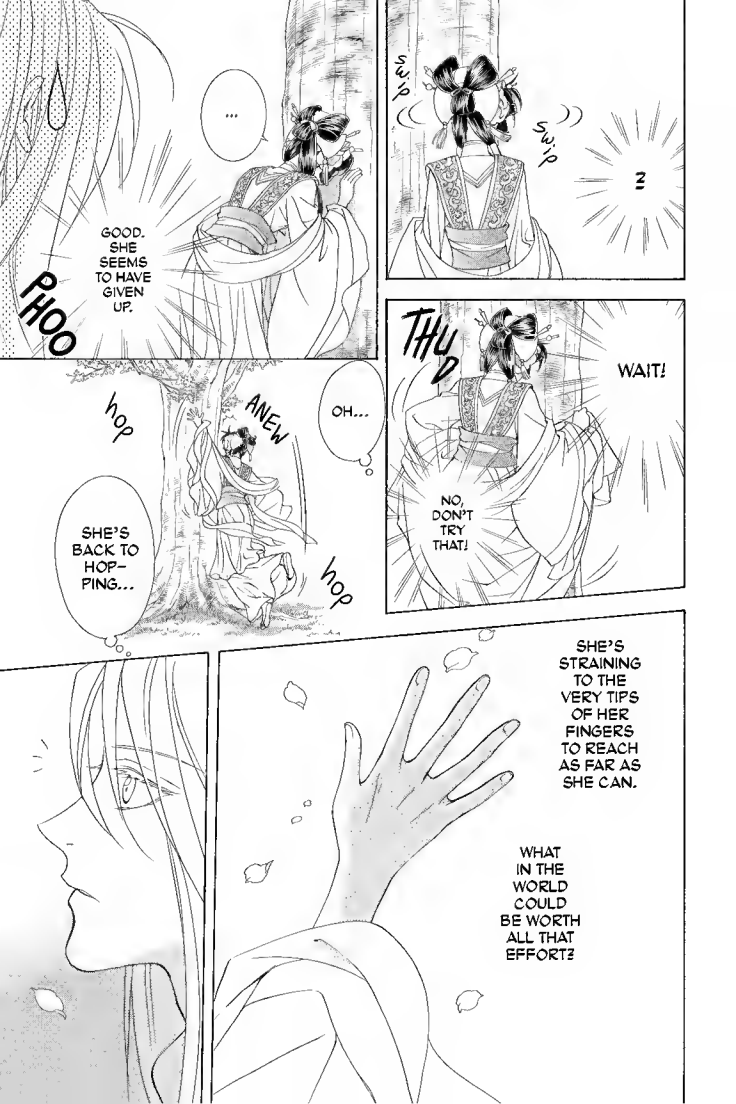
AT SUNDOWN I WOULD GO HOME BY MYSELF.
THE LADIES-IN-WAITING WOULD PASS BY ME AS THOUGH I WASN'T THERE.
IT FELT AS IF I'D BECOME A GHOST...
AND I SIMPLY REPEATED THAT ROUTINE OVER AND OVER.
UNTIL THAT DAY...
IS SOMEONE IN HERE?
SMILE

I WAS THRILLED...
MY BROTHER SEIEN...
...OVERJOYED...
...SO COMPLETELY HAPPY...
MY SECOND ELDEST BROTHER, THE ONE AND ONLY PERSON WHO WAS KIND TO ME.
I NEVER DREAMED IT COULD ALL SUDDENLY COME TO AN END.
YOUR MAJ-ESTY?
YOUR MAJESTY, WHERE ARE YOU?

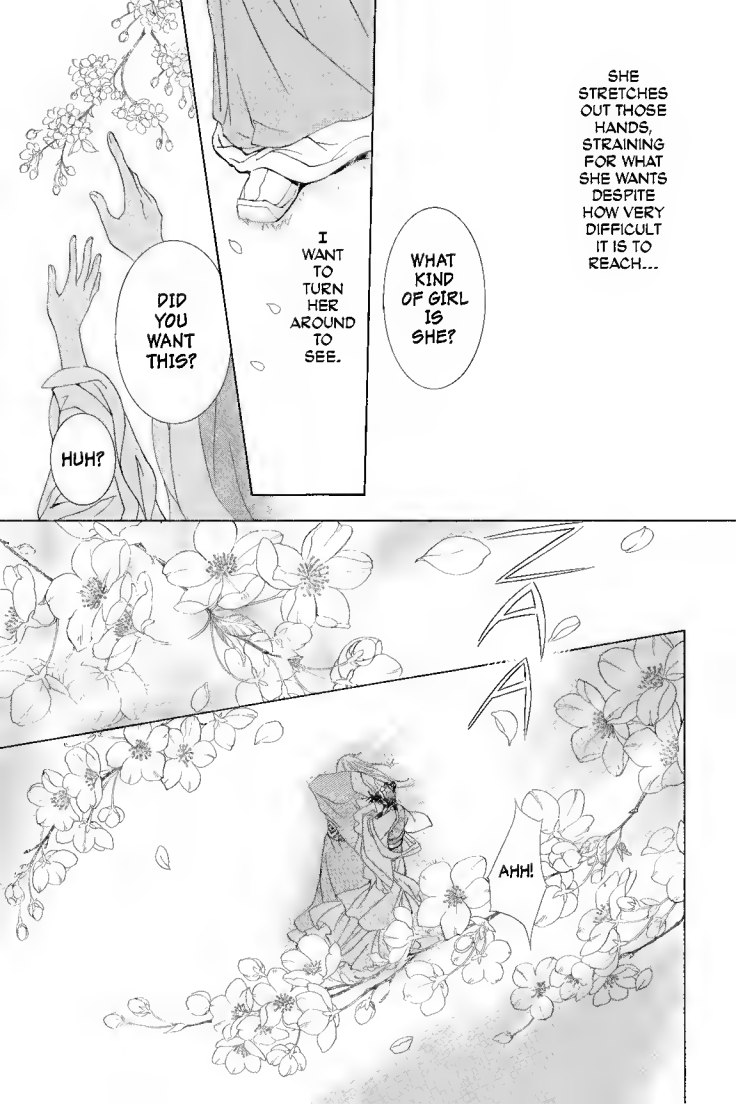
DID YOU FIND HIM?
NO.
SHHH
WHERE COULD HIS MAJESTY BE?
DON'T YOU HAVE ANY IDEA, LADY SHUSUI?
IT SEEMS THAT LATELY HIS MAJESTY IS ALWAYS CALLING OUT, "SHUSUI! SHUSUI!" FOR SOME REASON OR OTHER.
NO, I DON'T THINK—
WELL, HIS MAJESTY ALWAYS DID PREFER MEN TO WOMEN IN THE BEGINNING. THERE WAS LITTLE REASON TO HAVE AN INNER COURT.
BUT THAT ALL CHANGED WHEN NOBLE CONSORT HONG WAS HERE, DIDN'T IT?
Women have their charms too!
BUT AFTER NOBLE CONSORT HONG LEFT, HIS MAJESTY HAS FORSAKEN THE COMPANY OF BOTH MEN AND WOMEN. HE DEVOTES HIS FULL ATTENTION TO GOVERNANCE.
sigh

HOWEVER DID SHE GET SUCH A GRASP UPON HIS MAJESTY'S HEART?
LADY SHUSUI, YOU WAITED UPON CONSORT HONG. DO YOU KNOW HOW SHE DID IT?
AND HOW COULD HIS MAJESTY— LOVING HER AS HE DOES— LET HER LEAVE LIKE THAT?
IT'S ALWAYS SO QUIET HERE.

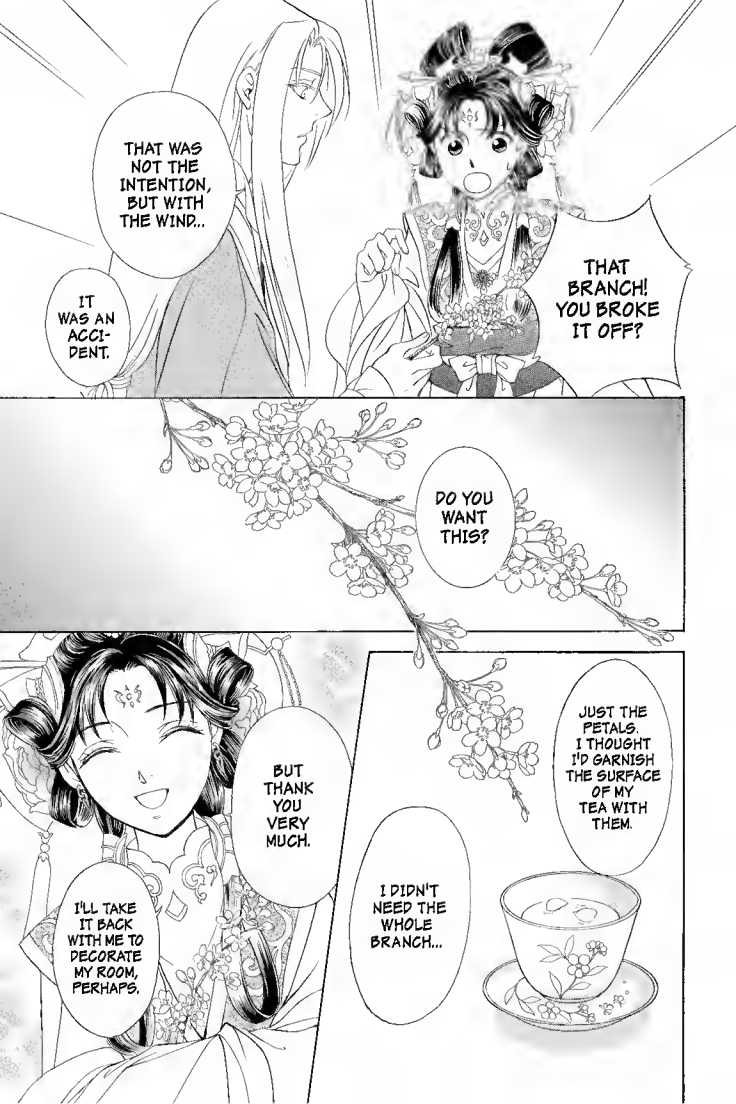

UNH!
OOF!
THAT'S RIGHT... THAT DAY I WAS HEADED TO THE ARCHIVES TO SEE SHOKA.
THAT WAS WHEN I MET SHURE!...
I CAN'T REACH...
hop
OOH— I'VE HAD IT!
FLUP
FWOP
WHY IS SHE HOPPING LIKE THAT?
hop
INTRI- GUING...
SHE MUST WANT WHATEVER IS UP THERE VERY MUCH.


swip
swip
Z
WAIT!
THUD
NO, DON'T TRY THAT!
...
GOOD. SHE SEEMS TO HAVE GIVEN UP.
PHOO
OH...
ANEW
hop
hop
SHE'S BACK TO HOP-PING...
SHE'S STRAINING TO THE VERY TIPS OF HER FINGERS TO REACH AS FAR AS SHE CAN.
WHAT IN THE WORLD COULD BE WORTH ALL THAT EFFORT?

I WALK PAST THIS PLACE EVERY DAY AND YET I NEVER NOTICED...
I SEE. THIS IS A CHERRY TREE.
THE CHERRY BLOS-SOMS...
...THE CHERRY BLOSSOMS ARE IN BLOOM.
THEY'VE TURNED SUCH A SWEET, PALE SHADE OF PINK...
THE CHERRY BLOSSOMS TRULY ARE BEAUTIFUL.


SHE STRETCHES OUT THOSE HANDS, STRAINING FOR WHAT SHE WANTS DESPITE HOW VERY DIFFICULT IT IS TO REACH...
WHAT KIND OF GIRL IS SHE?
I WANT TO TURN HER AROUND TO SEE.
DID YOU WANT THIS?
HUH?
AHH!

OH?
Y-YOU BROKE IT?
HUH?


THAT BRANCH! YOU BROKE IT OFF?
IT WAS AN ACCI-DENT.
THAT WAS NOT THE INTENTION, BUT WITH THE WIND...
DO YOU WANT THIS?
JUST THE PETALS. I THOUGHT I'D GARNISH THE SURFACE OF MY TEA WITH THEM.
I DIDN'T NEED THE WHOLE BRANCH...
BUT THANK YOU VERY MUCH.
I'LL TAKE IT BACK WITH ME TO DECORATE MY ROOM, PERHAPS.

IT IS NEARLY TIME TO DRESS FOR COURT, YOUR MAJESTY.
AH...
SHU-SUI.
I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT BE HERE.
YOUR MAJESTY.
SHUSUI... YOU'RE VERY BEAUTIFUL, AREN'T YOU?
YOUR MAJ-ESTY?
WE WERE JUST REMEMBER-ING THE TIME WE MET SHUREI.
ONLY GIRLS OF EXTRAORDI-NARY BEAUTY ARE CHOSEN TO SERVE AS LADIES-IN-WAITING, CORRECT?
THAT WAS WHY, WHEN WE FIRST SAW SHUREI'S FACE, WE WERE A BIT SURPRISED.
ER—

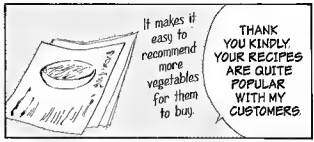
BUT THEN SHE SMILED...
...THE SWEETEST SMILE IN ALL THE WORLD.

SHAA
SO PERHAPS IT WAS LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT...?
That's obtuse even for us...
AND WE DIDN'T REALIZE?
...
SNOW...
SHURE!...

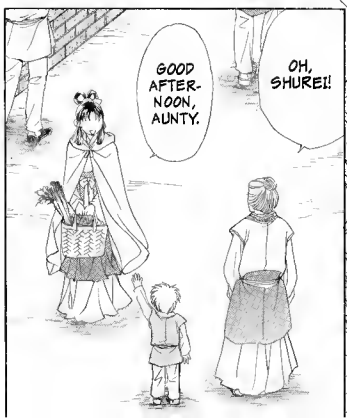
LET US GO.
JUST A MOMENT, SIR! YOU'RE CHARGING THAT MUCH FOR THESE LIMP LITTLE WEEDS?!
BEG YOUR PARDON, BUT VEGETABLES ARE ALWAYS EXPENSIVE IN THE WINTER. THAT'S JUST THE WAY IT IS!
EVEN THEN, I CAN'T BELIEVE HOW AWFUL THESE VEGETABLES ARE!
YOU ALWAYS HAVE THE BEST PRODUCE IN THE MARKET!
THE VERY BASICS OF TRADE REQUIRE QUALITY PRODUCTS, COMPETITIVE PRICING AND SERVICE WITH A SMILE!
YOU MUST TAKE CUSTOMER LOYALTY INTO ACCOUNT!

THEN I'LL START WRITING UP RECIPES OF SOME GOOD SPRING VEGETABLE DISHES FOR YOU.
REALLY?

THERE'S JUST NO BEATING YOU, MISS SHUREI...
Go on, take it.
TAKE A LOOK AT THIS ONE. OUR NEXT CROP WILL BE AN EARLY HARVEST OF STRAPPING SPRING VEGETABLES.


It makes it easy to recommend more vegetables for them to buy.
THANK YOU KINDLY. YOUR RECIPES ARE QUITE POPULAR WITH MY CUSTOMERS.

YOU NEVER DO MISS A CHANCE, DO YOU, MISS?
Here, take some scallions too.
IN EXCHANGE, YOU'LL THROW IN A FEW EXTRAS FOR ME TODAY, RIGHT?♡


GOOD AFTER-NOON, AUNTY.
OH, SHUREI!

SEE YOU LATER!
HEAVE

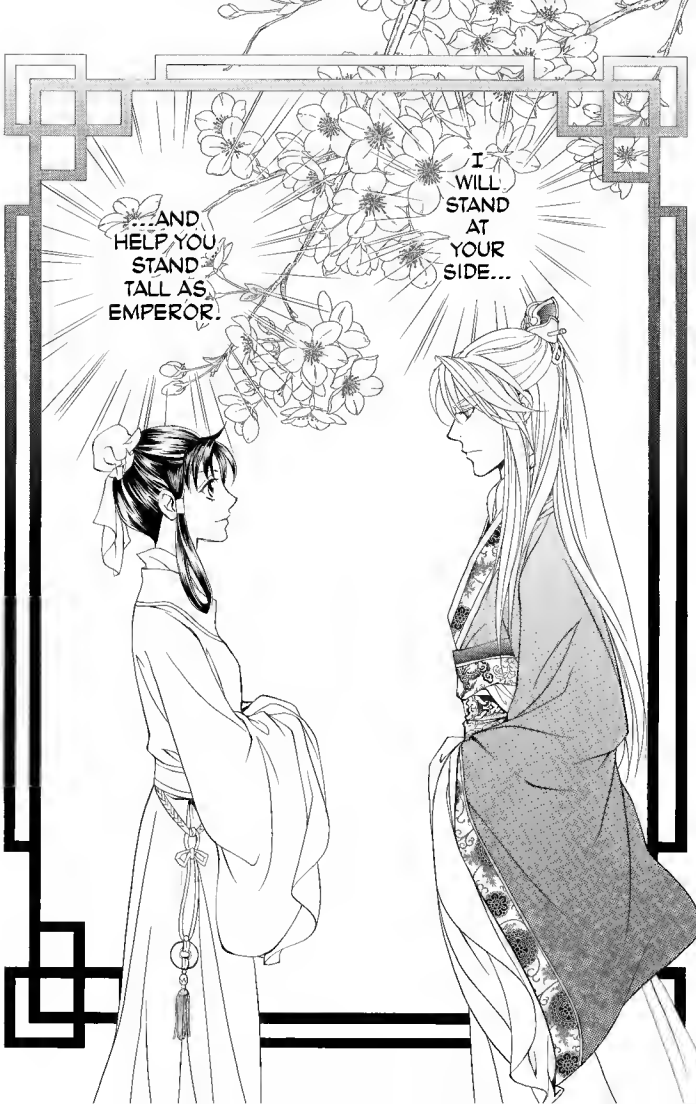
MY LADY...
SEIRAN! WELCOME BACK!
Thank you for your work today.
LOOK AT ALL THE VEGETABLES I GOT FOR FREE FROM THE MARKET! ♡
AND HERE IS DUCK MEAT FROM GENERAL RAN.
He said it was some kind of local specialty from Ran Province.
OHH! WE'RE GOING TO HAVE A FEAST TONIGHT! ♡
GENERAL RAN SAID TO TELL YOU THIS WAS A CARE PACKAGE TO ENCOURAGE YOU DURING YOUR STUDIES FOR THE IMPERIAL EXAM.
AND HERE, THIS ONE IS FROM MASTER KOYU.
GENERAL RAN...
SAY... SEIRAN?
RYUKI...
MASTER KOYU...

HIS MAJESTY IS QUITE WELL THESE DAYS.
OH. NO, NEVER MIND.
Thank you.
Allow me.
YES, MY LADY?
I SEE.
THE MINISTERS' ESTIMATION OF HIM AS AN EMPEROR IS RISING EVER HIGHER.
HE NEVER MISSES A SESSION OF COURT AND IS TENDING TO HIS DUTIES WITH GREAT VIGOR.
THOUGH THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO ARE UNEASY ABOUT THE EMPEROR'S APPARENT ECCENTRICITY HAS INCREASED AS WELL.
BEING ABLE TO STILL THE OPPOSITION AND CONTINUE HIS RULE HAS HELPED INCREASE HIS SUPPORTERS.
HE DID FACE A GOOD DEAL OF ANTAGONISM FOR UPHOLDING HIS PROCLAMATION TO ALLOW WOMEN TO TAKE THE CIVIL EXAM...

I'M GLAD TO HEAR THINGS ARE GOING WELL.
I WAS LURED INTO BECOMING RYUKI'S TUTOR WITH THE PROMISE OF 500 GOLD RYO AND CHARGED WITH TURNING HIM INTO A GOOD EMPEROR.
AT FIRST IT SEEMED LIKE AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK. BUT NOW...
RYUKI... HE'S REALLY WORKING HARD, ISN'T HE?
SHUREI...
SEIRAN ...
RYUKI GRANTED ME MY ONE TRUE WISH.
THE RIGHT FOR WOMEN TO TAKE THE IMPERIAL CIVIL EXAM.

WHY CAN'T GIRLS BECOME CIVIL SERVANTS?
I YEARNED AFTER A DREAM THAT I KNEW COULD NEVER BE GRANTED.
EVEN KNOWING IT IMPOSSIBLE, I STILL CLUNG TO IT...
...AND CONTINUED STUDYING ON MY OWN.
RYUKI HEARD MY WISH AND GRANTED IT.
HE OPENED THE WAY FOR ME TO REACH MY DREAM.
NOW IT'S MY TURN TO REPAY THAT KINDNESS.

FUU
SNOW...
WHEN THESE SCATTERED SNOWFLAKES CHANGE TO A FLURRY OF CHERRY BLOSSOMS...
...I WILL RETURN TO YOU.


I WILL STAND AT YOUR SIDE...
AND HELP YOU STAND TALL AS EMPEROR!

Side Story
One Tiny Wish
MY ARROGANT, PIGHEADED ELDEST BROTHER SHOKA LIES CONSTANTLY WITHOUT EVER BATTING AN EYELASH.
I'LL BE BACK SOON.
HE SMILES GENTLY AT US ONE SECOND, AND IS GONE THE NEXT.
THEN HE'D BE BACK JUST AS ABRUPTLY.
AND EVERY SINGLE TIME, HE'D FOOL US AGAIN WITH THAT SMILE AND AN ARMFUL OF GIFTS FROM HIS TRAVELS.

WHAT AN ADORABLE FACE!
AND THOSE TINY HANDS LIKE AUTUMN LEAVES!
OH, SHE'S JUST SO SWEET!!
LOOK AT HER, KURO!
NO, WAIT— DON'T LOOK!
WHICH IS IT?
Whisk
SHE'S FAST ASLEEP...
SHU-REI!!
LEAP
HEY!
NUH...

shup
thp
YOU MEAN YOUR FAULT, BROTHER.
THIS IS YOUR FAULT! YOU MADE SHUREI CRY!
SHU-REI?!
AAAA

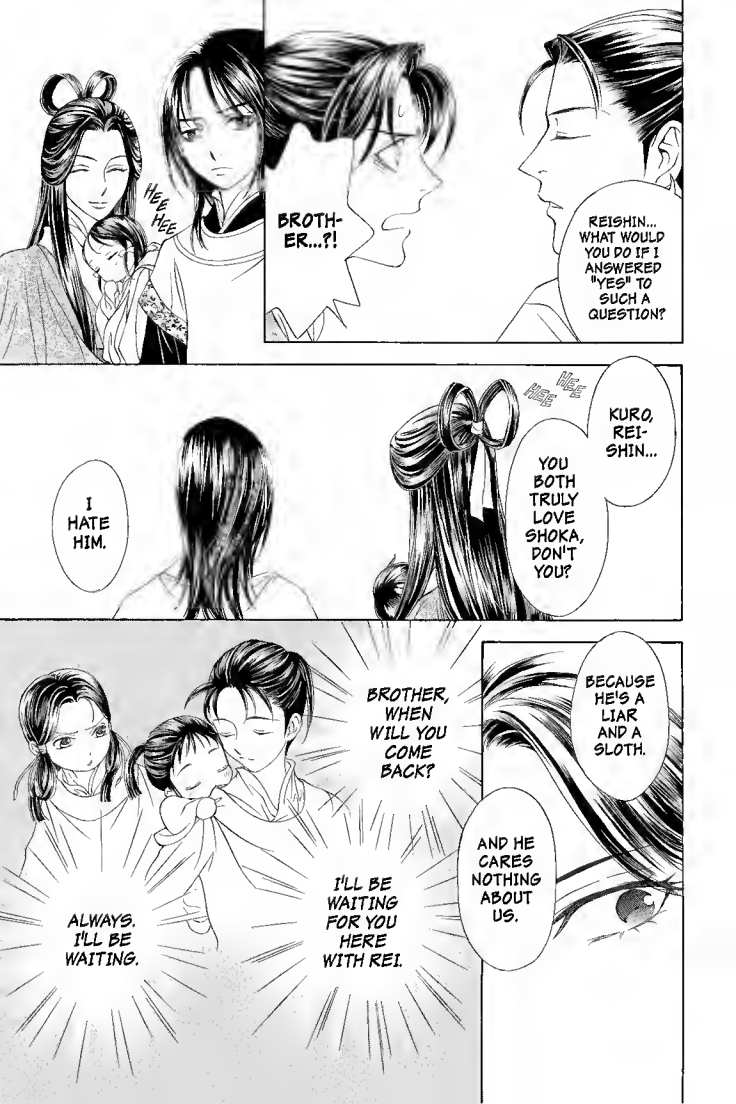
SHUREI SEEMED TO LIKE IT WHEN YOU PLAYED THE PIPA LAST TIME, BROTHER.
PLEASE PLAY FOR HER.
WAAAAAH
WAAH
...
YEEK!
SH-SHUREI!
tug
REALLY, SHOKA! LYING THERE AT EASE WHILE YOUR POOR LITTLE DAUGHTER IS CRYING LIKE A BABY CHICK?
IT'S ALL RIGHT. KURO SEEMS TO BE QUITE A MASTER AT GETTING SHUREI TO CALM DOWN.
Despite appear-ances.

EVEN IF I TRIED, I'D PROBABLY JUST GET TOSSED OUT AGAIN BY YOUR GLOWERING BROTHERS...
AND WHAT ABOUT YOU? YOU'RE HER MOTHER, AND YOU HAVEN'T GONE TO HER.
INDEED.
IT'S LIKE THEY'VE TAKEN SHUREI HOSTAGE... THOUGH I GUESS THERE'S A REASON FOR THAT, HM?
IT'S OKAY IF YOU RETURN LATER THAN YOU SAY, JUST PLEASE PROMISE ME YOU'LL COME BACK!!
THEY STAY CLOSE TO HER CRADLE ALL DAY LONG, ALMOST AS THOUGH THEY WERE GUARDING HER.
THEY'RE PROBABLY THINKING IF THEY CAN KEEP SHUREI HERE, YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO LEAVE EITHER.
IT'S BECAUSE YOU WORRIED THEM SO MUCH THE LAST TIME THEY CAME TO SEE YOU.
AND YOU RARELY EVER GO HOME TO VISIT THEM.

SO THIS IS THE TRUE FACE...
...OF A BLOOD-DRENCHED ASSASSIN.
THIS MUST BE WHAT THE PHRASE "HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT" MEANS.
IT'S BECAUSE WHENEVER I SEE THEM, ALL I DO IS LIE.
SO THEY DON'T TRUST ME.
IN THIS PLACE SHOKA LOVES, WHERE HE CAN LET DOWN HIS GUARD AND PLAY THE DOTING SIMPLETON IF HE WISHES...
THE FACE HE WEARS HERE— THE ONE HE HAS SHOWN HIS TWO YOUNGER BROTHERS FOR ALL THESE YEARS— IS THE REAL ONE.

SO YOUR BIG BROTHER ISN'T LYING TO YOU AFTER ALL, IS HE?
THIS WAS WHAT YOU TRULY WANTED TO PROTECT, WASN'T IT?
YES... AND I WANTED TO SHOW IT TO YOU AND SHUREI.
WE SHOULD CLIMB UP MT. HONG SOMETIME. THE SEA OF CLOUDS IS GORGEOUS...
IT'S BECAUSE HE HAS SOMETHING PRECIOUS HE WANTS TO PROTECT.
IT'S BECAUSE HE TRULY LOVES THEM THAT HE CAN LIE TO THEM SO EASILY.
SISTER...
IT SEEMS REISHIN IS ALREADY TAKING CARE OF THE APPLES FOR US.
THE NEXT TIME SHUREI WAKES, SHE'LL NEED TO BE FED.
I'LL HAVE SOME APPLES PREPARED FOR HER...
DASH
SISTER... IF YOU INTEND TO TAKE SHUREI WITH YOU TO SEE THE SEA OF CLOUDS FROM MT. HONG...
AH. LET'S ALL GO TOGETHER. IT'LL BE MY FIRST TIME ACTUALLY HIKING UP A MOUNTAIN.
?

KURO!
HOW DARE YOU SIT THERE CUDDLING SHUREI AFTER SENDING ME OFF TO PREPARE APPLES FOR HER?!
PLEASE QUIET DOWN. YOU'LL WAKE HER.
YOU BE QUIET, YOU OPPORTUNISTIC WHELP!
DID YOU MASH THE APPLES THOROUGHLY?
OF COURSE!
BROTHER!
YOU'RE SO NOISY...
YOU SHOULD SCOLD KURO AS WELL!
TELL HIM NOT TO KEEP SHUREI ALL TO HIMSELF.
ARE YOU MONOPOLIZING SHUREI?
No.
IT MUST SIMPLY BE A DIFFERENCE OF VIEWPOINTS.
THAT'S WHAT HE SAYS, REISHIN.
BROTHER! YOU DON'T LOVE KURO MORE THAN YOU LOVE ME, DO YOU?!


REISHIN... WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF I ANSWERED "YES" TO SUCH A QUESTION?
BROTH-ER...?!
HEE HEE
KURO, REI-SHIN...
YOU BOTH TRULY LOVE SHOKA, DON'T YOU?
HEE HEE
I HATE HIM.
BECAUSE HE'S A LIAR AND A SLOTH.
BROTHER, WHEN WILL YOU COME BACK?
AND HE CARES NOTHING ABOUT US.
I'LL BE WAITING FOR YOU HERE WITH REI.
ALWAYS. I'LL BE WAITING.

I REALLY HATE SHOKA.
BROTHERS ARE BROTHERS.
YOU BROTH-ERS... YOU'RE ALL LIARS.
WHAT?
NOTH-ING.
YOU KNOW, KURO...
THAT IS MY ONE WISH.
I HOPE YOU ALWAYS STAY EXACTLY AS YOU ARE.
MAY YOU ALWAYS...
...ALWAYS BE HAPPY...

**Kairi Yura** was born on January 16. She is the illustrator of both the manga and the YA novels for *The Story of Saiunkoku*. She is also the creator of the *Angelique* series. Yura's hobby is going to the theater.

**Sai Yukino** was born on January 26. She is author of both the manga and the YA novels for *The Story of Saiunkoku*. She received an honorable mention and the Readers' Award for Kadokawa's Beans Novel Taisho Awards. When she's not busy writing, Yukino enjoys massages.

# THE STORY OF SAIUNKOKU
## Volume 5

### Shojo Beat Edition

ART
KAIRI YURA
STORY
SAI YUKINO

Translation & English Adaptation/Su Mon Han
Touch-up Art & Lettering/Sabrina Heep
Design/Yukiko Whitley
Editor/Nancy Thistlethwaite

Saiunkoku Monogatari Volume 5
© Kairi YURA 2010
© Sai YUKINO 2010
First published in Japan in 2010 by KADOKAWA SHOTEN Co., Ltd., Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA SHOTEN Co., Ltd., Tokyo.

The stories, characters and incidents mentioned in this publication are entirely fictional.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the copyright holders.

Printed in Canada

Published by VIZ Media, LLC
P.O. Box 77010
San Francisco, CA 94107

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
First printing, November 2011

RATED
T
TEEN
PARENTAL ADVISDRY
THE STORY OF SAIUNKOKU is rated T for Teen and is recommended for ages 13 and up. This volume contains suggestive themes
ratings.viz.com

www.viz.com

www.shojobeat.com